

Narrating Madness: Subjectivity and the Politics of Representation

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Abstract

This article explores the methodological challenges of approaching the literary analysis of autobiographical texts written by psychiatrized individuals, applying mad studies. Two main aspects are addressed, along with their close relationship: language and representativity. Mental health culture promotes a generalized discourse on how to speak about and frame madness, heavily influenced by the hegemonic discourse of *psy* disciplines. This paper also highlights the difficulties in representing madness outside these hegemonic frameworks of meaning and discusses the need to re-semanticize madness in order to re-subjectivize it. Finally, some linguistic and representational strategies are proposed, drawn from first-person accounts, which can serve as counter-examples to the epistemological framework assumed in Western science: narrativity itself, the use of collective language, the reappropriation of terms, and the creation of alternative concepts to medical-psychiatric knowledge.

Keywords

mad studies, literary production, mad literature, madness, subalternity

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“Mi piace chi sceglie con cura le parole da non dire”

Alda Merini

1. Introduction: Madness and Mad Studies Applied to First-Person Literary Production

In recent years, the concept of “madness” has been revisited and redefined within various critical frameworks, particularly in the context of mad studies. In this paper, “madness” is understood as the institutionalization of psychic suffering and/or unusual experiences.² To be mad means having gone through psychiatric *dispositifs*³ and, therefore, having been subjectively shaped by the framework of the psychiatric/psychological sciences. I understand mad studies as the knowledge produced by us, psychiatrized subjects, in our struggle to free ourselves from these epistemological prisons that define and politically condition us. As Lucy Costa puts it, mad studies are

an area of education, scholarship, and analysis about the experiences, history, culture, political organising, narratives, writings and most importantly, the PEOPLE who identify as: Mad; psychiatric survivors; consumers; service users; mentally ill; patients, neuro-diverse; inmates; disabled – to name a few of the “identity labels” our community may choose to use.⁴

The broader research project⁵ that frames this paper focuses on the production of experiences of psychiatrization as outlined in Costa’s definition of mad studies, as well as on

2 The international Hearing Voices Movement [HVM] has pointed out the idea that unusual or extrasensorial experiences might not have a negative connotation, e.g. “hearing voices is a natural part of the human experience. Voices themselves are not viewed as abnormal or aberrant, rather conceptualized as a meaningful and interpretable response to social, emotional, and/or interpersonal circumstances,” as is referred in Dirk Corstens et al.: Emerging Perspectives From the Hearing Voices Movement: Implications for Research and Practice. In: *Schizophrenia Bulletin*, 40.4 (2014), 285-294, 286.

3 I use “dispositif” in the Foucauldian and Agambenian sense: “A resolutely heterogeneous set that includes discourses, institutions, architectural arrangements, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral, and philanthropic propositions; in short: both the spoken and the unspoken. There are the elements of the *dispositif*.” The original quote reads: “un ensemble résolument hétérogène, comportant des discours, des institutions, des aménagements architecturaux, des décisions réglementaires, des lois, des mesures administratives, des énoncés scientifiques, des propositions philosophiques, morales, philanthropiques, bref: du dit, aussi bien que du non-dit, voilà les éléments du dispositif”, in Michel Foucault: *Dits et écrits. 3: 1976 - 1979*, Paris 1994, 299.

4 Lucy Costa: Mad Studies – What It Is and Why You Should Care. In: *Mad Studies Network* (October 15, 2014). <https://madstudies2014.wordpress.com/2014/10/15/mad-studies-what-it-is-and-why-you-should-care-2/> (28.11.2024).

5 “Mad Literature: Own Epistemologies from First-Person Voices” (MadLit) (University of Vienna, 2024–2027).

the history, culture, political organization, and narratives of mad people and psychiatric survivors. More specifically, it analyses autobiographical texts written by psychiatrized authors, spanning from the late 19th-century to contemporary literature (e.g. Hersilie Rouy, Christine Lavant, Leonora Carrington, Alda Merini). The visibility and study of these individuals challenge the subjectivizing mandate produced by the medicalization of psychic suffering and/or unusual experiences. The development of mad studies fosters the political re-subjectivation of their subaltern identities.⁶

The study aims to explore the possibility of deriving a unique epistemology from the works of psychiatrized authors. In order to carry out this task and to address the theoretical and practical challenges involved in developing such an interdisciplinary project—namely, the application of mad studies to literary narratology—it is necessary to unpack the two ideological frameworks under which madness and its representations have historically been analyzed: the biomedical model (and the language derived from it) and the culture of mental health,⁷ which mutually influence one another. These approaches shape the concepts through which madness is understood and also determine the language used to speak about it.

Thus, what has historically been understood as madness determines how its representation is studied, while its representation, in turn, reinforces what is understood as madness within a broader social context. The hegemonic language of mental health (from *psy* sciences) permeates nearly every aspect of contemporary life and discourse.⁸ In recent years, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, a psychologizing and psychological language in human relationships has increasingly consolidated.⁹ This refers to the language with which we speak to, accept, or reject others, but also the language with which we communicate with ourselves. Functioning as a pervasive filter for inter-

⁶ The very difficulty of speaking for themselves turns them into a subaltern group, “insofar as their recognition is based on the imposition of a pathological or deteriorated identity, which translates into objectifying treatment, the denial of their subjectivity, narrative, and knowledge” of themselves. Original quote: “en la medida que su reconocimiento parte de la imposición de una identidad patológica o deteriorada que se traduce en un trato cosificador, en la negación de la subjetividad, la narrativa y el saber”. Miguel Salas Soneira: Usos de [La] Locura: Hacia El Reconocimiento de Nuevas Lógicas Interpretativas Del Sufriimiento Humano. In: *Salud Colectiva* 13.4 (2017), 713-729, 716. <https://doi.org/10.18294/sc.2017.1613>.

⁷ Javier Erro Pérez: *Pájaros en la cabeza: activismo en salud mental desde España y Chile*. Barcelona 2021.

⁸ Sara Ahmed: *The Promise of Happiness*. Durham 2010. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv125jkj2>; Edgar Cabañas, Eva Illouz: *Happycracia. Cómo la ciencia y la industria de la felicidad controlan nuestras vidas*. Barcelona 2019; Gabriel Barrón Pérez: Cultura terapéutica de la autoayuda: una aproximación teórica a la cultura popular del pensamiento positivo. *Sincronía* XXVI.81 (2022), 898-930. <https://doi.org/10.32870/sincronia.axxvi.n81.41a22>.

⁹ Mark Fisher: *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Lanham 2009; Erro Pérez: *Pájaros en la cabeza*.

preting all our behaviours, thoughts, and emotions, this language significantly influences our process of subjectivation.¹⁰ It springs from somewhere outside of ourselves, but its origin is not one-dimensional: in fact, it is a hodgepodge of psychological concepts, popular beliefs, and stereotypes.

Psy sciences are only one of the fields in which mental health culture arises. In fact, this culture extends far beyond the strictly clinical or psychological domain, permeating diverse areas of social life. The concept of the “mental health culture,” developed by Javier Erro at the beginning of his book *Pájaros en la cabeza* (2021), directly examines how these ideas—some rooted in the corporate world, others in psychology, and still others entirely colloquial—underpin the practices and discourses about our behaviours and emotions. These ideas stem from a wide range of fields: the *psy* sciences, the labor market, self-help literature, TV series, academia, social media, and more. An interesting aspect in Erro’s argument is that these ideas are neither true nor false, neither right nor wrong; they are simply the ones that gain the greatest social consensus.

The ideas that enter this culture are those that best adapt to a given social context—in our case, a neoliberal order—regardless of whether they are true, false, scientific, or popular. They shape and are shaped by the economic and political models that surround them. The culture of mental health generates and circulates conceptions that align with the needs of the various systems in which they play a role.¹¹

It is not possible to explore here how the culture of mental health operates across all areas of social life, but a couple of illustrative examples may clarify its scope. This culture manifests, on the one hand, when madness is treated as something external to the human: when it is used as an insult or to describe what is perceived as excessively unexpected, disruptive, or unstable; when mad people are regarded as dangerous, or when the eccentricity of a political leader is explained through their alleged “madness.” On the other hand, the culture of mental health also functions when human wholeness is conceived as the

10 Antar Martínez Guzmán, Omar Medina Cárdenas: Resiliencia y Cultura Terapéutica En Tiempos Neoliberales: Una Exploración de Discursos de Autoayuda. In: *Quaderns de Psicología* 23.1 (2021), e1808. <https://doi.org/10.5565/rev/qpsicologia.1808>.

11 Original quote: “Las ideas que entran en esta cultura son aquellas que mejor se adaptan a un contexto social determinado —en nuestro caso, un orden neoliberal—, independientemente de que sean verdaderas, falsas, científicas o populares. Perfilan y son perfiladas por los modelos económicos y políticos que las rodean. La cultura de la salud mental genera y pone en circulación concepciones propicias a las necesidades de los diferentes sistemas en los que cumplen un papel”. Erro Pérez, *Pájaros en la cabeza*, 29.

absence of distress, and emotions such as sadness, anger, or frustration are understood as feelings to be eradicated in the pursuit of an ideal of well-being.¹²

Although psychiatry as a discipline—and its cultural determinism—has been criticized not only by activism but also within academic fields such as the social sciences, philosophy, and history, the predominant approach, particularly in literary studies, still operates largely within the framework of the hegemonic psychiatric paradigm. Literature continues to employ madness as a narrative device while ignoring its embodiment in real subjects, and its critical or academic branches often romanticize madness or treat literary texts in a therapeutic or psychologizing manner.¹³

In the humanities, the predominant approach to analyzing works that address madness from a first-person perspective is a romanticizing one: as an aesthetic criterion, madness is ascribed a positive value—either external or internal—that determines the literary quality of the texts. The external value leads to a fetishization of madness¹⁴ and, consequently, to a genialization of the mad author; if the value is internal, the text is deemed valuable because of the author's madness, as that condition is interpreted as a source of a certain expressive depth or authenticity.

Likewise, in the social sciences, the predominant approach to the arts—including literature—tends to be clinical, focused on identifying or diagnosing an author based on their linguistic features.¹⁵ In this sense, it is not uncommon to find texts by *psy* experts that use autobiographical accounts to develop essays on the diagnoses attributed to these individuals.¹⁶

12 Ahmed: *The Promise of Happiness*.

13 In the field I have worked in most extensively—literature written in Spanish—I have observed not only how this hegemonic language of mental health has become increasingly embedded in literary studies and criticism, but also how it is already consolidated within the literary works themselves.

14 Martín Correa Urquiza et al.: La evidencia social del sufrimiento. Salud mental, políticas globales y narrativas locales. In: *Quaderns De l'Institut Català d'Antropologia* 22 (December 2008), 47-69, <https://raco.cat/index.php/QuadernsICA/article/view/121042>.

15 The clinical approach is increasingly present also in literary studies. A possible avenue for future research could involve outlining and analyzing the two main types of works that emerge in the humanities: on the one hand, those that uncritically rely on the supposed scientific authority of the *psy* language, adopting it as a resource that confers academic seriousness or legitimacy to their analyses; on the other hand, those that base their methodology on prejudices or ideas derived from popular culture, that is, from the culture of mental health.

16 The most recent one I have read is a paper by clinical psychologist and psychoanalyst Carlos Rey, titled “Causalidad psíquica en un caso de locura. A propósito de Unica Zürn,” in which he conducts a study of the German artist's literary work to analyze it from a clinical perspective. Carlos Rey: Causalidad psíquica en un caso de locura: A propósito de Unica Zürn. In: *Revista de la Asociación Española de Neuropsiquiatria*, 30.3 (2010), 437-445. <https://shorturl.at/kf64L>.

This *habitus*, to use Bourdieu's term,¹⁷ responds to a historical pathologization of subaltern groups: "to a social elite, the elements of subaltern groups always carry something barbaric and pathological."¹⁸ In the case of psychiatrized individuals, their subalternity exists precisely through this pathologization, reinforcing both their marginalization and the authority of the clinical gaze.

It is curious to note that for centuries in Europe the speech of the madman was either not heard at all or else taken for the word of truth. It either fell into the void, being rejected as soon as it was proffered, or else people deciphered in it a rationality, naive or crafty, which they regarded as more rational than that of the sane. In any event, whether excluded, or secretly invested with reason, the madman's speech, strictly, did not exist. It was through his words that his madness was recognised; they were the place where the division between reason and madness was exercised, but they were never recorded or listened to.¹⁹

This academic *habitus* both in humanities and social sciences is subalternizing even when employing critical tools such as those offered by Goffman, Foucault, or Franco and Franca Basaglia, and it entails additional academic risks, such as extractivism and assimilation.²⁰ The psychiatrized first-person voice has yet to speak, and has not yet *disrupted* the academic system from a position of strong objectivity.²¹ Even when mad studies enter academia through researchers who are c/s/x²² (consumer/survivor/ex-patient), the risk

17 Pierre Bourdieu: *The Logic of Practice*. Cambridge 1990.

18 Gramsci, *Cuadernos de la cárcel*, 175.

19 Michel Foucault: The Order of Discourse. In: Robert J. C. Young (ed.): *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*, Boston 1987, 48-78, 53.

20 Mad studies and mad literature, like other fields such as crip studies, queer studies, or postcolonial studies, are at risk of being co-opted by academia (Beresford and Russo, 2016). This occurs not only because of the desire to gain academic credit while the affected individuals remain excluded, but also due to the danger of reducing these forms of knowledge to a single academic interpretation. This can lead to the fallacy that academic knowledge must validate informal knowledges, appropriating the achievements of activism. As John Beverley argues, academia does not merely appropriate subalternity; it produces it. Peter Beresford, Jasna Russo: Supporting the Sustainability of Mad Studies and Preventing Its Co-Option». In: *Disability & Society*, February (2016), 1-5. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2016.1145380>. John Beverley: *Subalternity and representation: arguments in cultural theory. Post-contemporary interventions*. Durham 1999.

21 Sandra Harding: "Strong Objectivity": A Response to the New Objectivity Question. In: *Synthese* 104.3 (1995), 331-349.

22 See Brenda A. LeFrançois, Robert Menzies, and Geoffrey Reaume (eds.): *Mad Matters: A Critical Reader in Canadian Mad Studies*. Toronto 2013, 6; Nev Jones and Robyn Brown: The Absence of Psychiatric C/S/X Perspectives in Academic Discourse: Consequences and Implications. In: *Disability Studies Quarterly* 33.1 (2012). <https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v33i1.3433>.

remains of privileging knowledge produced by scholars over civil, informal, or activist knowledge.

The overarching aim of the project underlying this contribution is to substantiate and render the psychiatrized experiences of the authors analyzed as *subjects of knowledge* through the lens of mad studies, thereby returning epistemological tools to the mad community. However, the proposed methodology entails various risks and challenges, which will be examined in the following sections.

2. Representation and Language in Mad Literature

The problem of language—what language is used in society, with what language madness is shaped in fictional texts, with what language it is analyzed, or with what language it can be addressed by those affected—is inherent to the problem of representativity, thoroughly studied in subaltern studies (Spivak, Guha), which emerged as a critique of historiography by asking who represents and who is represented, as well as in other works on marginalized identities (Butler, Hall).

Writing autobiographically is inherently a politically mediated decision, entailing issues of representation and agency that are frequently approached in literary theory or academia as philological concerns but are fundamentally epistemological and political in nature. In fact, writing an autobiography as a member of a subaltern group does not necessarily mean that one's demands are heard. Despite these significant efforts, as Gramsci argued, being part of a subaltern group entails a continuous struggle to achieve, “a permanent victory,” since any attempt to unify the subaltern classes “is continually broken up by the initiative of the dominant groups.”²³ Moreover, the ability to speak does not necessarily imply the possibility of being heard or understood. Epistemic injustice, both testimonial and hermeneutical,²⁴ assumes particular relevance in the context of mad subjectivity. Categorization as mad (mental ill, disturbed, etc.) stems from perceptions of emotional instability, unpredictability, lack of reason, and, ultimately, untrustworthiness. Furthermore, the understanding of our experiences has been shaped by hegemonic

23 Antonio Gramsci: *Cuadernos de la cárcel*. Puebla 1999, 178-179.

24 Miranda Fricker: *Epistemic Injustice*. Oxford 2007. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198237907.001.0001>.

frameworks of meaning, primarily the *psy* sciences, which have left our first-person experiences devoid of terms, strategies, or concepts beyond the master's tools.²⁵

Research in autobiographical literature consistently addresses these difficulties of representativity from two distinct perspectives: on one hand, from the perspective of authorial production (who is in a position to write about their experience, who has access to cultural circuits, who succeeds in publishing, and with what kind of reception); and on the other hand, from the perspective of narratology (the author-narrator: who they speak for, which collective they represent, and whose voice they take on). These two aspects can also be understood through the German term *Vertretung*, as reviewed by Spivak in her engagement with Marx, “political representation, the representation of the proxy, or of ‘speaking for,’”²⁶ as opposed to *Darstellung*, which refers to “the philosophical concept of representation as staging or, indeed, signification.”²⁷

To address these issues of representation and language, the focus is first on authorial/narratological analysis, understanding that those able to write within an oppressed collective challenge the notion of the individual bourgeois author predominant in literature, while also acting as representatives of the group to which they belong. This “subaltern dialectic”,²⁸ which is neither fully inside nor fully outside the silenced group, allows for an examination of the ambiguous nature of both the texts and the resulting identities.

Secondly, the focus is only on the production that, to a certain extent depending on its historical moment,²⁹ demonstrates some awareness of oppression, with texts that include a critique of psychiatry, both its ideology and its treatments. This aspect is important because madness ceased to be able to speak from the eighteenth century onward, with the rise and consolidation of psychiatry, the only discipline capable of granting it reason and meaning. “The language of psychiatry, which is a monologue of reason *about* madness,

25 As Audre Lorde famously stated in 1979 regarding poor Black lesbian women, “The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house” (see Audre Lorde: The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. In: *Postcolonialism*. London 2023, 1670-1673).

26 Ritu Birla: Postcolonial Studies. Now That's History. In: *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*, New York 2010, 117-133, 122.

27 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: Can the Subaltern Speak? *Ibid.*, 36-108, 51-52.

28 Sara R. Gallardo: Autobiografía subalterna: tensiones, límites y posibilidades del decir en la práctica contemporánea. In: *Perífrasis. Revista de literatura, teoría y crítica*, forthcoming.

29 Many of the authors in my corpus, particularly those writing before the 1970s, were not themselves aware of belonging to a subalternized collective. As such, any attribution of political or collective value to their work must be undertaken with caution, avoiding the imposition of political meanings not present in the texts while recognizing other forms of collective potential that are indeed discernible.

has been established only on the basis of such a silence;”³⁰ therefore, it would be expected that psychiatrized authors articulate their experiences only through the hegemonic discourse, that is, the medical-psychiatric framework. In other words, they are limited to using the master’s tools to describe their personal experiences within psychiatric institutions.

The challenges of *Darstellung* in autobiography—the staging or re-presentation of their lives—are further complicated by the dominant narratives that shape their identities. However, as seen particularly in the literature from the 1970s and 80s, with the rise of the mad movements and, later, of mad studies, these authors have gained tools also developed by other collectives (mainly LGBTQ+, crip, and anti-colonial/anti-racist) to help them address the task of telling their own stories.

Both mad activists and mad writers use language (re)appropriation and experiential storytelling to construct first person narratives. In fact, the mad movements have adopted the name “first-person-activism” since the 1970s. This refers to the need to speak for themselves and, equally important, to stop being spoken for by others, namely, the psy experts.³¹ Mad studies have made it possible to recognize “mad ‘activists’ as subjects of their own history and protagonists of their own liberation.”³²

Prominent figures in activism, such as Leonard Roy Frank, Judi Chamberlin, and even Kate Millett, have brought their personal experiences into public debate through (literary) autobiographical texts. Other initiatives, including community radio stations, magazines, fanzines, and websites like the aforementioned HVM,³³ collect and disseminate testimonies, though not necessarily within the realm of literature. The ability to narrate oneself beyond imposed terms is especially relevant in the realm of literature, as it challenges testimonial injustice and, at the same time, contributes to constructing a shared experiential narrative in which we can recognize ourselves outside the medical language, thereby helping to create the community Costa refers to.

30 Michel Foucault: *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*. New York 2013, x-xi Emphasis in the original.

31 Martín Correa-Urquiza: La condición del diálogo. Saberes profanos y nuevos contextos del decir. In: *Revista de La Asociación Española de Neuropsiquiatría* 38.134 (2018), 567-585, 568.

32 Juan Carlos Cea Madrid, Tatiana Castillo Parada: Locura y neoliberalismo. El lugar de la antipsiquiatría en la salud mental contemporánea. In: *Política y Sociedad* 55.2 (2018), 559-574, 570. <https://doi.org/10.5209/POSO.57277>.

33 See e.g. <https://www.hearing-voices.org/voices-visions/personal-experiences/#content> (28.11.2024) or <https://0contenciones.org/category/testimonios/> (28.11.2024).

Although literature written by mad individuals about their processes of psychiatrization has existed since the consolidation of psychiatry in many Western countries, it cannot be regarded as a cohesive body of work. In a previous article,³⁴ I explored the possibility of developing a methodology for mad literature based on mad studies and questioned whether something that can truly be called *mad literature* actually exists. I chose to coin the term “mad literature” within literary studies to bring together the experiences of these individuals, many of whom were already recognized writers or artists before their crises and institutionalizations. However, it is not yet possible to speak of a genealogy, nor of a group of authors consciously aware of themselves as a cohesive collective.

While many of them belonged to the dominant classes, their psychiatrization led to a level of social displacement sufficient for them to be treated similarly to their fellow inmates in asylums. At the same time, they retained a certain status, which explains why their stories were able to be written, found publishers and circulated in the literary market. This dynamic—the “subaltern dialectic”—cannot be fully understood without considering the rise of feminism, which in recent years has facilitated access to numerous testimonies from women whose works had remained out of print or untranslated.³⁵

I was aware of the risks involved in attempting to artificially form a group of mad literature. Understanding psychiatrization as a form of subalternization also requires recognizing that its subaltern nature makes its history “necessarily fragmented and episodic.”³⁶ As I noted in the aforementioned work, my methodological approach is not without its challenges, but it arises from a stance that opposes the objectification of psychiatrized subjects and the therapeutic/mental health culture. Consequently, mad art is not analyzed using the same psychiatric logics that have shaped it.

Moreover, permanently and univocally associating the identity of each of these writers with their process of psychiatrization is dangerous, as it can essentialize their

³⁴ Sara R. Gallardo: Aproximación a una metodología subalterna en lo autobiográfico. *Movimiento social y sujetos psiquiatrizados*. In: Marta Pascua and Manuel Santana (eds.): *Poder y resistencia en las escrituras exocanónicas*. Berlin 2023, 141-158.

³⁵ In Spain, we have examples of works by Alda Merini or Unica Zürn, which have recently been translated or reissued. A special case for the c/s/x movement is the book *On our own* by Judi Chamberlin, which was translated into Spanish at the initiative of a particular activist, Elisenda Tuneu. As she explained in the presentation in Madrid, her goal was to make one of the foundational works of mad studies accessible to the Spanish-speaking public—a work that had been of great help to her.

³⁶ Gramsci, *Cuadernos de la cárcel*, 178.

experience.³⁷ I accept, following Thorneycroft, that “crip and mad subjectivity—as well as any subjectivity—is contingent, permeable, leaky, and revisable.”³⁸ However, we need strategies, such as “strategic essentialism,” to frame and explain the violence that is unique to us and that only makes sense within the frameworks of these epistemological prisons. This tactic, though specific, is effective in essentializing identity “in order to mobilize change and/or recognition.”³⁹

3. Representativity and Narrativity of Madness

3.1 Who are the Mad People?

If we look at media, advertising, or cultural production in general, we might ask: where are the mad people? The figure of the mad person remains a highly productive device—not only in literature but also in comedy, horror films, and series, docufiction, and advertising. While the mad figure can certainly be analyzed as a social construct, its embodiment remains absent. The mad person functions as a means to explain something else but is never fully embodied.

To understand why, we must revisit the concept of the “constitutive outside,” coined and developed by Derrida, Butler, and Stuart Hall, and others. The constitutive outside refers to the power of marginality in shaping the center of the concept of “human being.” The performativity that generates human “categories” is produced through repetition *and* exclusion of certain subjectivities to the margins of habitability and existence.

The abject designates here precisely those “unlivable” and “uninhabitable” zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the “unlivable” is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject. This zone of uninhabitability will constitute the defining limit of the subject’s domain; it will constitute that site of dreaded identification against which—and by virtue of which—the domain of the subject will circumscribe its own claim to autonomy and to life. In this sense, then, the subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive out-

³⁷ I am not exempt from this same problem or paradox. On one hand, as a c/s/x scholar, researching mad literature is a political task that I believe I must undertake; however, at the same time, I risk essentializing myself as a *mad* researcher.

³⁸ Ryan Thorneycroft: Crip Theory and Mad Studies: Intersections and Points of Departure. In: *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies* 9.1 (2020), 91-121, 93. <https://doi.org/10.15353/cjds.v9i1.597>.

³⁹ Ibid., 105.

side to the subject, an abjected outside, which is, after all, “inside” the subject as its own founding repudiation.⁴⁰

This Eurocentric dialectic of inside/outside or center/periphery operates through binary oppositions (e.g. white/black, man/woman, able-bodied/disabled, heterosexual/homosexual, cisgender/transgender). The concept of binarism has been extensively explored in anticolonial studies and feminist theory (as well as in crip and disability studies). As Paul B. Preciado puts it, binarism is “a truth-production apparatus [that] does not work.”⁴¹ Butler explains how the opposition of concepts gives rise to the central subject (white, European, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied, and sane man), whose existence depends on the exclusion of other subjectivities, pushing them to the margins of categorization.

Madness similarly originates from a binary conception of the world. As historian Roy Porter highlights in *Madness: A Brief History* (2010), the history of Western philosophy and science is deeply rooted in binary thinking. Porter specifically refers to the humoral theory in medicine, which frames insanity as the direct opposite of sanity. Furthermore, within the category of “sickness,” it establishes a binary opposition between mania and melancholy:

Humoralism provided a comprehensive explanatory scheme, staking out bold archetypal parameters (hot/cold, wet/dry, etc.) and embracing the natural and the human, the physical and the psychological, the healthy and the pathological. Plain and commonsensical to the layman, it was also capable of technical elaboration by the physician.

Within humoralism’s easy-to-visualize grid of opposites, it was simple to picture mental conditions as extensions of physical ones. In a scheme in which healthiness lay in equilibrium and sickness in extremes, mania implied—almost required—the presence of an equal but opposite pathological state: melancholy. The categories of mania and melancholy—representing hot and cold, wet and dry, ‘red’ and ‘black’ conditions respectively—became ingrained, intellectually, emotionally, and perhaps even aesthetically and subliminally, in the educated European mind [...].⁴²

40 Judith Butler: *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*. Hoboken 2014, 3.

41 Original quote: “un aparato de producción de verdad [que] no funciona”. Paul B Preciado: *Un Apartamento En Urano: Crónicas del Cruce*. Barcelona 2019, 41.

42 Roy Porter: *Madness: A Brief History*. Oxford New York 2010, 42-43.

In mental health culture, the mad *person* is always the *other*: the constitutive outside of what is considered human. This is why it remains so easy to use pejorative language about madness—a practice society has largely abandoned or significantly reduced when referring to other marginalized groups. When speakers use the semantic field of madness idiomatically (in English language: madman/madwoman, crazy, loony, mental, sick, psycho, lunatic, weirdo, schizo, maniac, nuts, nutcase, cuckoo, etc.), there is no specific mad person in mind, nor is the concept of “the mad” even consciously visualized. The insult, as in other related contexts like LGBTIQ+ communities, comes from the performative chorus of the history:

“Queer” derives its force precisely through the repeated invocation by which it has become linked to accusation, pathologization, insult. This is an invocation by which a social bond among homophobic communities is formed through time. The interpellation echoes past interpellations, and binds the speakers, as if they spoke in unison across time. In this sense, it is always an imaginary chorus that taunts “queer!”⁴³

“Crazy,” “mad” or similar terms are simply devices used to designate antisocial, inappropriate, out-of-place, or disruptive behaviour/individuals. The mad person still fail to be materialized as individuals who experience what is understood as madness. When they are embodied, they appear through distorted images. In the case of men, the range of subjectivity is broader: the genius or the eccentric in mainstream culture (such as Sheldon Cooper, Gregory House, or Melvin Udall in *As Good as It Gets*) becomes a category to includes male subjects whose “deviant” behaviours are justified and justifiable and, in the end, endearing—even if they are misogynists or abusers. In the field of feminism, a paradoxical situation arises: although feminist activists and theorists since the second wave have pointed out that masculine domination and oppression cause mental suffering in women worldwide,⁴⁴ the slogan “I am not crazy” is still used as a device for being recognized as a human being, being believed, but resorting to the strategy of constitutive outside.

43 Butler, Bodies that matter, 226.

44 Tatiana Castillo Parada: De la locura feminista al “feminismo loco”: Hacia una transformación de las políticas de género en la salud mental contemporánea. In: *Investigaciones Feministas*, 10.2 (2019), 399-416. <https://doi.org/10.5209/infe.66502>.

3.2 Re-Semanticizing Madness: Subjectivity and Narrativity

It is no longer a matter of invisibility. The media, and even literature, do not ignore madness. The mad people, even when hidden or concealed, have always been there, and very often have been represented, albeit for unethical reasons; yet there is no path forward to “semanticize” our existence. Our words are deeply loaded with meaning, connotations, and interpretations given by non-mad/sane people. What must be done is to re-semanticize madness, de-psychiatrize and de-psychologize it.

The burgeoning discipline of Mad Studies has a critical role to play in this regard. However, for the field to contribute to Mad liberation, it must aim higher than transforming the mental health system or adopting alternatives to biomedical psychiatry or replicating other social justice movements and critical studies disciplines that have found a place in society by fitting neatly within society’s tax-paying, law-abiding, we-are-just-like-you-and-want-what-you-want Master Narrative. Invariably, these movements have replicated and perpetuated the oppression of the dominant culture and have left many members of those movements behind.

For true liberation, Mad scholars and activists must re-write the Master Narrative in its entirety, and that narrative must be grounded in difference not sameness, humanity not sanity, and the inherent value of people not the transactional value of money.⁴⁵

The concept of the “constitutive outside” ultimately helps us understand how subjectivity is closely tied to representativity. For some philosophers, such as Stuart Hall, identity cannot exist without representation,⁴⁶ since “identities are thus points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us”.⁴⁷ For others, such as Paul Ricoeur, “without the aid of narration, the problem of personal identity is doomed to an insoluble antinomy.”⁴⁸ Ricoeur coined the term “narrative identity,” which he uses to address the aporia between identity and narration, just as Vincent de

⁴⁵ Wilda L. White: Re-Writing The Master Narrative. A Prerequisite for Mad Liberation. In: Peter Beresford and Jasna Russo (eds.): *The Routledge International Handbook of Mad Studies*, 76-89, 87. London New York 2022.

⁴⁶ Stuart Hall: Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities. In: Anthony D. King (ed.): *Culture, Globalization, and the World-System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity*, 41-69. Minneapolis 1997.

⁴⁷ Stuart Hall: Introduction: who needs ‘identity’?. In: Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (eds.): *Questions of cultural identity*, 1-17, 6. Chicago 2011. <https://www.doi.org/10.4135/9781446221907.n1>.

⁴⁸ Paul Ricoeur: *Tiempo y narración III. El tiempo narrado*. Mexico 1996, 997-998.

Gaulejac reminds us that “the subject is constructed through the work they do on their history.”⁴⁹

In addition, it is psychiatry as a disciplinary practice⁵⁰ that excludes the subject from their own subjectivity because, within this framework of hegemonic knowledge, as Franco Basaglia argued, “the mentally ill person is an excluded one who [...] will never be able to oppose what excludes them, since every one of their actions is constantly circumscribed and defined by the illness.”⁵¹

Narrativity thus emerges as a capacity for agency that opposes psychiatric oppression, as a position of resistance that challenges the very concept of mental illness.⁵² The moment of crisis and diagnosis leads, simultaneously, to an abrupt rupture in the construction of meanings surrounding one’s own life experience, which can be understood through the Lacanian concept of *the Real*. In my view, this represents a narrative break in the *fictions* that sustain subjectivity, which is, at the same time, externally and medically endowed with content and meaning, leaving little or no space for the subject’s own voice.⁵³

Hence, mad literature, understood as that produced by psychiatrized subjects who speak about their processes of psychiatrization as subjectivizing processes, as situations that have constituted them as *persons*, challenges that primordial negation, which opposes testimonial injustice. For the madman (and even more so for the madwoman*), the act of speaking itself is already challenging; it requires the courage or pride to speak about oneself in relation to the tortures and coercions of medico-psychiatric institutionalization. Therefore, taking the political stance of not using medical language—of “inventing” a new language to narrate personal experiences—is an extremely challenging act that forces each of us, as readers, to confront the hermeneutical injustice intrinsic to mad narration.

49 Vincent de Gaulejac: Memoria e historicidad. In: *Revista Mexicana de Sociología* 64.2 (2002), 31-46, 32.

50 Michel Foucault: *Los anormales: curso del Collège de France, 1974-1975*. Madrid 2001; Michel Foucault: *Vigilar y castigar: nacimiento de la prisión*. Buenos Aires 2004; Michel Foucault: *El poder psiquiátrico: curso en el Collège de France, (1973-1974)*. Madrid 2018.

51 Franco Basaglia: *La institución negada. Informe de un hospital psiquiátrico*. Barcelona 1970, 154.

52 Ekaterina Netchitailova: The Mystery of Madness through Art and Mad Studies. *Disability & Society* 34.9-10 (2019), 1509-1515, 1509. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2019.1619236>.

53 Correa-Urquiza, La condición del diálogo, 575.

3.3 Language and Counter-Language Strategies

Three main linguistic strategies that I identified in both literary and non-literary first-person narratives are the use of collective language, the re-appropriation of terms, and the deliberate choice not to say certain words, which leads to the invention of alternative ones. Another strategy, which I do not explore in this paper, is the act of writing as an absolute performative.⁵⁴

Even 30 or 20 years before the emergence of the mad movements in several Western countries, collective awareness among authors can be traced. Examples include Leonora Carrington (1943/1988), Christine Lavant (1946/2001), or Unica Zürn (1967/1977),⁵⁵ who describe the other patients in their books, the violence exercised against them, and even their desires and misfortunes. The same mechanism is later used by Alda Merini (1986/1994) and Kate Millett (1990).

In present times, Mar García Puig provides a relevant example in her book *La historia de los vertebrados* (2023), in which she intertwines her own personal story with that of other mad women, rescued from the remnants of psychiatric archives, particularly from the Bedlam Museum in London. In cultural or media productions such as the documentary *Zauria(k)* (2019), the comic *Desmesura* (2018), and the community radio program Nikosia (2023),⁵⁶ there is widespread use of the first-person plural (“our own voice,” “our suffering in the first person,” “we will go on our own,” “words that we had,” etc.). This conveys a sense of community and a consciousness of “representation” (in the Spivakian sense of *Vertretung*), similar to that of other subalternized groups.

It is also observed the use of pejorative terms in the books that appear from the 1970s onward, associated with the strategy of reappropriation. This coincides with the same strategy used by queer and crip communities, who reappropriated concepts that had categorized them as pathological, deficient, or abnormal, in order to claim an

54 “Absolute performative” is a term used by Paolo Virno to designate the expression “I speak.” Previously, I have applied this term to autobiographical production, where, in the metatextual parts of many autobiographical works, a repetition can be observed in the use of the expression “I write” as an absolute performative act by the author-narrators. See Paolo Virno: *Cuando el verbo se hace carne: lenguaje y naturaleza humana*. Madrid 2005.

55 Unica Zürn’s book *Der Mann im Jasmin* was first published in French in 1971, a year after her death, but it was written, as she herself recounts in the book, after her first hospitalization in 1957. See Unica Zürn: *Der Mann im Jasmin*. Frankfurt am Main Berlin 1992, 72.

56 These references are based on ongoing research. Some of the results mentioned in this paper were presented at the REPS 2023 Congress. The conference paper can be consulted as follows: Sara R. Gallardo: Psiquiatrización y cuerdismo: las voces en primera persona en el estado español. In: Actas del IX Congreso de la Red Española de Política Social (2023), 175-182. <http://hdl.handle.net/11201/164803>.

identity “through self-naming that unveils, provokes, and subverts the norm, serving as a powerful anti-assimilationist stance”.⁵⁷ This political strategy is inextricably tied to the processes of medicalization and pathologization that emerged in the Modern era, through the Enlightenment, the biomedical model, and later, the establishment of total institutions⁵⁸ such as the asylum.

As Paul B. Preciado reminds us, “the words ‘feminism,’ ‘homosexuality,’ ‘transsexuality’ or ‘gender’ were not invented by sexual activists, but by the medical and psychiatric discourse of the past two centuries.”⁵⁹ Similarly, the English term *crip* “refers to the process of reclaiming words that were and continue to be used as insults in our everyday culture.”⁶⁰ Likewise, the term *queer* was adopted by “groups of dykes, fags, drag queens, and transsexuals” in the late 1980s as part of their political and cultural resistance.

[They] take the streets as a space for the public theatricalization of exclusion and use the language of abuse to claim resistance against the heterosexual norm. First performative strategy: by radically displacing the subject of enunciation, they reclaim the sexual slur queer (dyke, fag, but also pervert or freak) and transform it into a site of political action.⁶¹

The reappropriation of language within mad activism is also carried out through the profanation of certain terms with “strongly negative historical and cultural connotations”,⁶² such as “mad,” “crazy,” “nuts,” etc., with the aim of opening new conceptual and cognitive

57 Original quote: “mediante la autodenominación que devela, provoca y subvierte la norma, siendo un poderoso posicionamiento antiasimilacionista”. Laura Moya: Teoría tullida. Un recorrido crítico desde los estudios de la discapacidad o diversidad funcional hasta la teoría CRIP. In: *Revista Internacional de Sociología* 80.1 (2022), e199, 6. <https://doi.org/10.3989/ris.2022.80.1.20.63>.

58 Erving Goffman: *Internados. Ensayos sobre la situación social de los enfermos mentales*. Buenos Aires 2019[1961].

59 Original quote: “las palabras ‘feminismo’, ‘homosexualidad’, ‘transexualidad’ o ‘género’ no las inventaron los activistas sexuales, sino el discurso médico y psiquiátrico de los últimos dos siglos”. Preciado, Apartamento en Urano, 113.

60 Original quote: “hace referencia al proceso de reapropiación de palabras que fueron y son utilizadas como insultos en nuestra cultura cotidiana”. Moya, Teoría tullida, 6.

61 Original quotes: “grupos de bolleras, maricas, travestis y transexuales”; “[t]oman la calle como espacio de teatralización pública de la exclusión y utilizan el lenguaje de la injuria para reivindicar la resistencia a la norma heterosexual. Primera estrategia performativa: desplazando radicalmente el sujeto de la enunciación, se reapropian del insulto sexual queer (bollera, marica, pero también pervertido o tarado) para hacer de él un lugar de acción política”. Paul B. Preciado: *Testo yonqui*. Madrid 2008, 236.

62 Edurne de Juan Franco: “(Sobre)vivencias de la psiquiatría”: una aproximación a las subjetividades de la violencia institucional y los activismos locos. In: *Ponto Urbe* 29(diciembre) (2021), parr. 34. <https://doi.org/10.4000/pontourbe.11029>.

pathways. Since the autobiographical serves as a space for questioning the Self, mad autobiographical production has used the strategic resource of re-appropriation. Focusing solely on the titles, we see how Alda Merini titles one of her autobiographical stories *La pazza della porta accanto* (The Crazy Woman Next Door) or Fernando Balius in Spain titles his comic *Desmesura. Una historia cotidiana de locura en la ciudad* (Excess. A Daily Story of Madness in the City).⁶³

The cultural productions mentioned earlier also employ an alternative vocabulary to that proposed by the medical-psychiatric language. Thus, terms such as “being institutionalized,” “psychic suffering,” or “first-person suffering” are used, as well as “self-management” or “autonomy.” To reinforce this idea of psychiatrization, the term “mental illness” is avoided, and instead, “diagnosis” and “diagnosed individuals” are used, as this is understood to mark the milestone of entry into institutionalization.

For the subaltern, speaking is not simply about resisting the violence of the hegemonic performative. It is, above all, about imagining dissident stages where it becomes possible to produce another performative force. To invent a new scene of enunciation, as Jacques Rancière might say. To dis-identify in order to reconstruct a subjectivity wounded by the dominant performative.⁶⁴

In the process of disidentification and the creation of new enunciative frameworks, binomial expressions are not used, but instead, completely alternative concepts. For example, in the documentary *Zauria(k)*, the word “search” is used to encompass a range of behaviours, thoughts, and inclinations that could be understood as *madness*, or the term “human expressions” is used instead of referring to symptoms.

By opposing the language of the norm, not only is the medical-psychiatric discourse left behind, thereby opening a path of dis-identification from those diagnostic identities and their constructs, but it also, in my view, constitutes a path toward a self-defined epistemology.

63 The title of the US version of the comic retained the term *madness: Traces of Madness: A Graphic Memoir* (Graphic Mundi, 2024).

64 Original quote: “Para el subalterno, hablar no es simplemente resistir a la violencia del performativo hegémónico. Es sobre todo imaginar teatros disidentes en lo que sea posible producir otra fuerza performativa. Inventar una nueva escena de la enunciación, diría Jacques Rancière. Desidentificarse para reconstruir una subjetividad que el performativo dominante ha herido”. Preciado, Apartamento en Urano, 124.

4. Concluding Thoughts

As in the case of crip movements,⁶⁵ mad theory or mad studies emerge after articulating a civil political movement that seeks to intervene in the factuality of our lives. Theory came afterward: it has served to explain why we are treated the way we are, and to trace the cultural origins and foundations of madness as a mechanism of exclusion and control. For this reason, I perceive theory itself as a practice and explicitly acknowledge my presence in this text as one among many subjects. Inspired by Sandra Harding's spirit of "strong objectivity,"⁶⁶ I want to clarify my positionality and articulate my political relationship to the object of my study.

I am even critical of certain approaches within mad studies that, working from the social sciences, elevate art or literature to a quasi-divine status and present them as inherently oppositional spaces to psychiatry and its norms. The *creative genius* does not exist; it is a historically framed and assumed attribute.⁶⁷ Creativity cannot exist independently of material conditions. There are individuals who, due to a relatively comfortable socioeconomic position and despite the violence and hardships they endured, were able to secure a space to sit, access to paper or a typewriter, and the time to reflect and write about their experiences.

However, mad studies remain necessary for analyzing the works of these writers, beyond the romanticization of their sufferings, with the aim of showing that there are indeed people—beyond distorted and stereotypical representations—who suffered and found words, sometimes very close to the norm. Lorde famously said, "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house," and I agree: we cannot play their game by their rules. Nor can we build an alternative knowledge based on the same premises of positivism, rationality, and objectivity on which Western knowledge and science, including the *psy* disciplines, are grounded. However, we also cannot demand a heroic and exemplary subjective experience, always resistant, oppositional, and firm. Adrienne Rich's powerful poem, which resonates deeply with Lorde's words, reminds us of this: "This is the oppressor's language / yet I need it to talk to you."⁶⁸

65 Moya, Teoría tullida, 2.

66 Harding, Strong Objectivity, 331-349.

67 See Pierre Bourdieu: *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*. Stanford 2006.

68 The poem is titled *The Burning of Paper Instead of Children*, written in 1968. For a reading of the poem, please refer to, e.g. <https://www.sccs.swarthmore.edu/users/99/jrieffel/poetry/rich/children.html> (29.11.2024).

Regarding our representation, we are faced with a rather pessimistic scenario: on one hand, psychic suffering and its manifestations are still understood today through medical/psychiatric/psychological discourse, that is, through the knowledge of the norm; on the other hand, therapeutic culture and emotional capitalism persist on depoliticizing human suffering by individualizing and capitalizing it—by holding individuals completely responsible for their own well-being and, therefore, disconnecting them from their material conditions. Furthermore, the mental health culture actively separates severe psychiatric experiences from their discursive acts and, of course, from the institutional violences they entail. Even though depression and anxiety have become part of our everyday language, “mad” subjects (those who are medicated and/or physically restrained) continue to be the constitutive outside of what is considered human.

Although all subalternized communities are rooted in epistemic injustice, in the case of subjects embodied as mad, this injustice is directly tied to the label: irrationality. As such, the lack of credibility is intrinsic to the categorization as “madman” and even more so as “madwoman.” Therefore, the “famous” stigma is, *de facto*, the psychiatric label inseparable from its embodiment in the subject.

The writing of autobiographical texts that narrate the experience of institutionalization “destabilizes the dominant cultural representations of (dis)ability and (a)normality.”⁶⁹ Without bringing violence to light, we cannot challenge it,⁷⁰ because “making pain public means forcing—even without guarantees—its social recognition” and, consequently, recognizing the subjectivity of the one narrating it.⁷¹ One of the challenges of mad studies and mad literature is to bring to the forefront those uninhabitable zones, the ungrievable lives,⁷² even in the absence of so many voices that have been unable to speak or have lacked the words. Only when we illuminate the margin, even if only from the

69 Moya, Teoría tullida, 4.

70 Thorneycroft, Crip Theory and Mad Studies, 103.

71 Original quote: “hacer público un dolor supone forzar su reconocimiento social (aunque no hay garantías de que ocurra). Si se reconoce un daño, se reconoce al sujeto que lo clama y, por tanto, se produce subjetividad”. Asun Pié Balaguer: Abrir sufrimientos para habitar otra vida In: Jordi Solé Blanch and Asun Pié Balaguer (eds.): Políticas del sufrimiento y la vulnerabilidad. Barcelona 2018, 25.

72 Judith Butler: *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* London 2009, 15, 22.

*doorjamb*⁷³ of categorization, do we see how much humanity remains for us to recognize in ourselves.

Finally, we must think more often in Butler's words: the "abjected outside[, which is], after all, 'inside' the subject as its own founding repudiation."⁷⁴ It is not us whom *the sane people* fear, but the madness within them, their own capacity to go mad as a human condition. The mad people are the scapegoats of the norm, which tries to shape everyone and which no one truly embodies.

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73 The term "doorjamb" in Spanish is also used as an expression for "driving someone crazy" (literally to take someone off the *doorjamb*). I think it serves as an apt metaphor for being intersectional: I am *under* the doorframe, looking inside academia, but as a survivor of psychiatry and as someone who was never meant to become a scholar. I am able to look both in and out, but not as binaries. To be under the doorframe is to exist in the *in-between* (Bhabha), rejecting binary frameworks. It is about the suturing of identities, as Stuart Hall suggests, creating a space that does not conform to either/or categories. See Homi K. Bhabha: *El lugar de la cultura*. Buenos Aires 2013 and Hall, Old and New Identities.

74 Butler, Bodies That Matter, 3.