Can Madness be Utopic? Analyzing Utopias through Madness as Political Praxis

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ABSTRACT

The paper contends that madness can be used as a way to engage with theories of utopia. The author draws upon their own autoethnographic experiences of madness and analyzes them through a Nietzschean perspective. They argue that utopic thought requires a breakage with normative interpretations of the State. Thereby, madness should be examined as a pathway to rupture with the normative world and thus develop a utopia. Utopias may require madness.

1. Introduction

Utopic thinking is often characterized in terms of idealism and dreaming. It is a form of thinking which is not anchored to the present, in fact it must reject the present to dream up an expansive future. Madness, as well, is a breakage with the now. Bipolar madness grasps at utopia. In moments of mad clarity my mind grasps onto possibilities that feel divine in their perfection. Simultaneously, these moments are clouded by other aspects of madness – the haunting ghost of despair quick to follow the magical highs and the present fears that chase me from the mountains of mania. Kelly E. Happe describes utopia as desiring "a world for subjects we would not recognize" (Happe 2020: 272). It is a continual project towards perfection, rather than a final end. Importantly, this understanding of utopia rejects what Laurence Davis (2021) and James C. Scott (1998) refer to as a form of "social organizing," in which a force from above such as a State establishes what it means to be a utopia. I utilize Davis' theory of a "grounded utopia." Davis writes it "emerges out of the ebb and flow of the historical process and remains tethered to it. Epitomized by the grassroots struggles of the dispossessed, it opens the historical process to the unpredictable, radically new by connecting past and further in the transformation lived experience of the present" (Davis 2021: 573). Utopia can best be understood as a

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happening that cannot be separated from the peoples who create and develop a theory of utopia which transcends superstructures like the State. Due to this, I approach utopia as an expansive project, rather than a narrow prescriptive ideal.

Utopia is not a singular vision, but rather one comprising a plurality of possibilities. It can best be understood as an orientation towards other worlds rather than concretized ideological practices (McKean 2016). Utopian thinking may orient us towards existent structures in such a way that we can trace the current operations of power. Utopic scholarship presents significant possibilities for reimagining political praxis. One can imagine and develop possible worlds which transcend contemporary political frameworks, but they cannot fully be disentangled. In this light, I find experiences of madness to be understated. Madness is understood through its breakage with reality, and utopias hinge upon the ability to break with current sociopolitical realities to create something new. Thus, madness and the act of going mad are not dissimilar from the utopic project.

This paper utilizes a hybrid autoethnographic investigation of the author's experiences of bipolar madness to interrogate the overlaps between utopia and madness as breaking from normative worlds. Autoethnography as a methodology embodies the Mad Studies' prerogative to elevate Mad perspectives. Autoethnography approaches research and the researcher as enmeshed. The researcher is a part of the research process. Their experiences are significant to their work. It places the evocative experiences of the self within the context of analytical theory. This methodology disrupts a separation between the researcher and theory and acknowledges bodies as sites of what Rybas and Gajjala (2007) term "epistemologies of doing." In light of this, I utilize my experiences as a person with bipolar and epilepsy to interrogate the ways in which madness as a state of exception to the logical makes it a unique site of utopia. It presents an orientation toward the world that rebukes the logic underpinning much of utopia and realist discourses.

I broach the utopic project from a Mad perspective and draw upon Nietzsche's theory of *amor fati* and rejection of structuralism in my analysis of madness as a utopic orientation. Nietzsche argues that *amor fati* is an ontological "yes" towards one's existence. Individuals should not only accept their lives, but also throw themselves into it. It is a compulsion not towards the future or the past but is a compulsion towards the self in its entirety. Madness is a state in

which one transcends normative orientations towards the world and by embracing one's fate one thereby embraces these episodic periods of transcendence.[1] I will begin my analysis with a discussion of my methodology of hybrid autoethnography. I then examine both madness and bipolar. Following this, I will examine utopic literature, Nietzsche's analyses of myth and *amor fati*, and finally madness as a utopic orientation. I contend that madness as a political praxis holds the possibility to revive and continue the utopic project.

2. Theorizing Madness

Madness is not a monolithic moment or experience. The joys of bipolar mania or hypomania can be accompanied by anger and paranoia. *During hypomanic and mixed episodes my body and mind are full of static. Pin pricking me onwards. Once I stumbled into manic delusions, and I knew I could speak to God. My mind stretched not towards heaven but sideways, slipping between the world I was physically in, and the transcendent world my mind skittered into. I held onto the visions of possible worlds, writing them down in journals, which I then hid from the world and myself, afraid of what would happen if someone else found the route to heaven on earth.*

The highs of madness are impossible to convey while mad or sane. The language of madness is incomprehensible. It is non-sense. Madness has its own internal logic. The moments I have lost my mind, I did not feel abandoned to a world without logic. Rather, I felt immersed in two worlds. One which obeyed normative logics. The other, which disobeyed these same logics. Normative logic escaped me, falling through my fingers. The other world, with its magical otherworldliness, seemed more real and more important than my normal world.

My experiences of madness have not always been transcendent and joyful. However, they have always rebuked normative logic. Whether that be in hypomanic, depressive, or mixed states, my mind has always been in a different state. It has felt viscerally askew, rubbing at the edges of reality until exhausted, I am dropped into sanity. My mind, returned to myself, always feels lost. It initiates a process of reuniting with me, and a feeling of deep loss and pain regarding the possible worlds that now feel shut away. Utopia feels most possible when

[1] This is not to say that all experiences of madness are pleasant or enjoyable. It is to say that madness includes a rejection of the world as-is.

mad. Once I am sane, the ordinary strictures of the world are reinstated, and I feel bound by them.

Currently, I am sane. I find it impossible to resurrect the breathtaking worlds I once grasped. In fact, it is impossible for me to remember those worlds and the pathways I traced towards reifying them. Madness, as a transcendent state, is a potential orientation against the world. It butts up again the boundaries of our thinking and presuppositions. Sara Ahmed (2014) in *Willful Subjects* traces how disabled bodies do not fit into capitalist logistics and thereby are disobedient. Likewise, madness is disobedient. It orients itself away from the normative world and towards the potential worlds. It is a state of being shaped by and informed by an embrace of what is non-sensical.

Ahmed's argument that disabled bodies are non-normative and turn against a world which is designed for capitalist models intersects with Black disability theory. Sami Schalk defines Black disability politics as "part of both disability justice and Black liberation movements" (Schalk 2022: 11). La Marr Jurelle Bruce (2021) develops madness as a methodology by which Black artistry (and activism) can be understood. Bruce utilizes four overlapping definitions of Madness: first, phenomenal madness, the lived experience "as experienced in the consciousness of the 'mad' subject"; second, clinical madness, or the various diagnoses which may coincide with phenomenal madness; third, madness as anger, "an affective state of intense and aggressive displeasure"; and fourth, psychosocial alterity, the myriad deviations and resistance to what is considered "normal" within a psychosocial context (Bruce 2012: 372). The fourth definition, Bruce argues, may apply to any idea, person, or behavior that "perplexes and vexes dominant psychosocial logics [...]" (Bruce 2012: 372).

Bradley E. Lewis notes that Bruce's work provides an important argument in which "medicalized categories should not dominate madness: they must be in conversation with deeply experiential insights, rage against the norm, and psychosocial subversion and resistance" (Lewis 2022: 507). Sanism, the systemic discrimination and oppression of individuals who may be perceived to have some form of mental impairment, may pathologize any modality of existing which may challenge its logics. Sanism, like ableism, racism, sexism, and all other forms of discrimination exists within a network of oppression which intersect and may not be easily disentangled. Schalk and Kim note that BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) have experienced disability in ways which are significant to those communities, "Feminists of color tend to approach disability from within broader concerns among people of color in a racist

world, ranging from environmental racism and medical abuse to police brutality and economic exclusion." Schalk and Kim use the example of Judith K. Witherow and Jo Carrillo's analyses of disability, health, race, and class, "In each instance, these Native feminists demonstrate that their personal and communal experience of disability, illness, and disease cannot be understood outside of systems of violent racial, economic, environmental, and sexual exploitation" (Schalk and Kim 2020: 32). The boydmind experience, as noted previously, is a model of understanding disability in a way which acknowledges and grapples with the various ways in which people encounter and are encountered by the world.

Douglas C. Baynton's work "Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History" grapples with the ways in which the concept of disability has been utilized to justify discrimination against marginalized groups, particularly by labeling them as disabled. Baynton notes how disability was used to justify the practice of American slavery, "American blacks, for example, were said to flourish in their 'normal condition' of slavery, while the "free' or abnormal neg*o' inevitably fell into illness, disability, and eventually extinction" (Baynton 2013: 39). The concept of disability was applied to support racist hierarchies and extended into gender discrimination as well, with anti-suffragists arguing women inherently had "disabilities that made them incapable of using the franchise responsibility, and that because of their frailty women would become disabled if exposed to the rigors of political participation" (Baynton 2013: 42). Disability and impairment have been categories used to reinforce kyriarchal structures of power and oppression.[2] Contemporary critical disability theorists and Mad theorists present alternative approaches to disability and Madness, in which these categories are chosen in and of themselves.

My experiences, as a white person, are inescapably shaped by my whiteness. Likewise, my cultural groundings in being Cajun and Catholic influence the ways in which my Madness erupts. The bodymind theory argues against the separation of the body and mind, instead contending both inform and shape the other. Our identities and the ways in which we are identified are significant to developing an intersectional political praxis of Madness. For this reason, I utilize hybrid autoethnography as this paper's methodology.

[2] Kyriarchy is a term from feminist theory that applies to connecting social systems built upon domination and oppression.

3. Hybrid Autoethnography

Methodologically, autoethnography privileges the researchers' experiences as a site of knowledge and inquiry. Traditionally, autoethnography has focused upon social structures and qualitative analysis (Bochner and Ellis 2022; Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011). Arthur Bochner describes it as making "social science something more than an end in itself" (Bochner 2012: 155). In the philosophical context, it reifies abstract theories, and by rendering them concrete, extends the application of philosophy to understanding and theorizing disability.

Sara Ahmed (2019) and Tankut Atuk (2020) argue bodies are sites of knowledge and representation. Sami Schalk and Jina B. Kim argue that disability is "simultaneously a 'bodymind' experience and a part of intersecting oppressions" (Schalk and Kim 2020: 32). The body and mind are enmeshed with one another, and they are shaped and forced by the spaces in which we exist. Autoethnography upsets the traditional separation of the researcher from research, much as the bodymind theory disrupts the separation of the body from the mind. Bodies articulate discussions and knowledge of power and identity, and by including my body within this paper, I place my "doing" as a person with bipolar and epilepsy within those discussions.

Heidi Lourens (2021) describes autoethnography as a methodology of invitation. The audience is invited to understand and join the author in their experiences. By engaging in autoethnography, the author can "voice a textured and nuanced narrative of their embodied experiences" (Lourens 2021: 1209). It emphasizes the overlap and connections between outer and inner realities, focusing upon personal experiences, making it uniquely situated to communicate Mad perspectives. Brett Smith and Andrew C. Sparkes contend autoethnography is a methodology that "encourage acts of witnessing, empathy and connection that extend beyond the self of the author and thereby contribute to our understandings in ways that, among others, are self-knowing, self-respectful, self-sacrificing and self-luminous" (Smith and Sparkes 2008: 24). It is a method in which the author offers themselves to the reader, in light of this, it can be understood as emancipatory research.

Oliver (1997), Morris (1992), Barton (2005), and A.J. Peterson (2011) describe emancipatory research as research which empowers individuals with disabilities by utilizing the expertise of the researcher to further the goals,

aims, and perspectives of individuals with disabilities. As a methodology, it promotes Mad voices and experiences as sites of inquiry. Moreover, it is a way in which, as Lourens notes, one can make sense of one's "raw experiences." (Lourens 2021: 1209) The experiences of madness are by their nature, chaotic, nonsensical outside of the logics of madness. Considering this, I do not intend to make madness fully legible and understandable. Rather, I intend to illustrate the ways in which madness may act as a possible political praxis. I intend to do this through an analysis of madness, utopia, and Nietzsche's concept of *amor fati.*

4. Current State of Mad Studies

The user/survivor literature of Madness is frequently given an outsider status, frequently due to numerous barriers to full academic participation. Jayasree Kalathil and Nev Jones note that "it remains unusual for philosophy and theory-focused conferences and events to explicitly encourage and prioritize the representation of activist scholars, particularly those who identify as user/survivors" (2016: 184). The lack of this inclusion and support "for involvement, leadership, or critical scholarship, it unsurprisingly becomes far more difficult to locate user/survivor scholars and theorists" (185). Thus, dominant rhetoric focuses upon the "distress" of Madness or has the potential to romanticize Madness, without providing a basis for scholarship or theory created by and for Mad scholars. R.D. Laing's *Divided Self* (1960) continues to be one of the most significant and far-reach phenomenological investigations of madness. Nonetheless, Laing avoids describing the mad experience itself and focuses upon the therapeutic process. And yet, as Margaret Price notes, "disorderly minds [...] show up all the time, in obvious and not-so-obvious ways" (2011: 3). Even though disorderly minds, Mad minds as well, are everywhere, they are still marginalized, and it is difficult to find a clear presence of Mad studies within critical theory. Diana Rose argues this because, "We may still be the ultimate Other, even in the eyes of scholars attuned to marginalization. This is not a question of 'stigma' or 'discrimination,' but a radical and probably unknowing refusal to see madness as political" (2016: 208).

User-led research has attempted to engage with madness as political (Lowell Masson & Crevar 2023). It is difficult to participate in Mad studies as a person with bipolar. Critiques of Mad studies and user-led research point to the

limitations of *who* can participate in academic discourse. However, Rose, a proponent of user-led Mad studies, argues this "is a Catch-22 – you are articulate and so not representative so we will not listen to you; 'ordinary' patients are not articulate (but we think they are satisfied) so we cannot listen to them either. Everybody is silenced, again" (2016:209). It is a problem that only some Mad voices are listened to; however, the exclusion of Mad voices which are legible furthers the marginalization of Mad scholars and Mad studies. In this light, if we seek to adopt Madness as a political practice, it is imperative to do user-led work, even with its limitations.

In this approach, Madness acts as a form of "data." Zahari Richter developed the concept of "mad data" which operates as a bridge between "signs" of madness with the subjective experience:

> The stim, the stammer, the shake, the impairment, the twitch, and the ramble all indicate various embodied mechanisms of storing memory as well as alternative types of play [...]. Conceding that there is a real "felt" difference in those diagnosed with various psychiatric labels means that others may recognize differing demands of adaptation, some insurmountable or requiring chemical ease (Richter 2017: 328-329).

Richter advocates for "recasting pathologized behavior" as higher processing "play." This form of analysis allows me to place both minor "signs" of episodic shifts, such as the stimming I require fervently during mixed episodes, and the major "signs" such as religious delusions which intertwine with my own religious beliefs as cultural signifiers of bipolar. Mad data is a method for building networks, such as the Hearing Voices Network, and actively neutralizes what are frequently understood as psychiatric symptoms. This methodology brings Mad studies and mad experiences into the realm of critical theory, challenging the outsider status of the majority of Mad studies.

Although I am currently sane, the dark waters of depression drift within my mind. The accompanying anger that bristles under my skin, painful both physically and psychically, rolls through me. Is this data? I have a small binder clip I use as a makeshift fidget spinner. I open it, close it, spin it, clicking softly, occasionally pinching my skin, rolling the metal arms between my fingers. Psychosis is not always limited to mania. It can also live in depression. I look for in the prickling of my skin, listening for the whispers, which race to reach my ears. I am acutely aware of the felt difference that Richter notes. This paper is firmly grounded in the user/survivor framework, and I believe the outsider status is integral to my proposition of Madness as a political praxis.

Madness, across the literature, is something unruly. It is fraught, and buts against sanist presumptions of the world. It has been weaponized as a concept to limit resistance to non-normativity. Even as Mad voices are limited within the scholarship, they persist. Foucault notes in *History of Madness* that the Enlightenment sought to bring madness to heel under logic, and yet unruly minds continued. Madness as a political praxis must necessarily rebuke Enlightenment tendencies to revere logic and the belief that all things can be known, studied, quantified, and understood. Instead, Madness looks towards psychosis and the rupture with logic to grasp towards a politics that is nonsensical and illogical. By its very nature, Madness grasps towards the utopic project.

Utopic thinkers have contended that utopias may be as of yet undefinable. The worlds we seek to create cannot be fully grasped if utopia is an ongoing project. Madness is a utopic praxis in that it lives in worlds that are not *there* there. It exists in the not-yet. As such madness, or a mad approach to the world, is one such way we can access utopia.

5. The Utopic Project: An Overview of Utopic Theory

Utopia or utopic thought is an expansive field. Utopias may be thought of in terms of an ongoing project, or it may be considered as a final end for a political society. The former approach has been expanded upon by Kelly Happe and Laurence Davis. They argue that if utopia is broached as a finality, it has the potential to project post-Enlightenment Western values upon the ideal world. It thereby eschews an eschatological premise, which is found in thinkers such as Karl Marx, who believe that utopia was an inevitable end of resolving capitalist contradictions. In contrast, Walter Benjamin would go on to refute Marx's argument, noting this theory depends upon idealized projections of the proletariat and relies upon all persons acting in predetermined manners based upon their class. Benjamin's refutation asks that utopic thinkers confront the realities of the world, while also maintaining suspended hope.

Benjamin's refutation is essential to breaking with utopic thought as an eschatological end. Moreover, it assists in building a foundation of utopia that is, as of yet, unknown. Davis explores this in the context of grounded utopia, "Utopia in Benjamin's is thus not something waiting for us at the end of history [...] it is an ever-present possibility [...]" (2021: 564). They go on to argue that considering utopia as a happening lends itself to a more expansive utopic project. Thus, we should expand beyond structuralist interpretations of utopia.

Grounded utopia allows for a myriad of histories and experiences to be included in one's vision of possible worlds. Furthermore, it allows for a post-modern interpretation of utopia. If we are to take normative interpretations of utopia away from interpreting utopia as a project, we can begin to embrace utopia as an expression of the here and now.

Another approach to utopia is through the perspective of human rights. Wolfsteller and Gregg are two foremost scholars who hold this stance, arguing if we seek to best realize a future in which human rights are shared, then one must adopt a "local social construct" approach, "the notion of human rights as local social constructs understands the idea of universally valid norms as a contingent, historical achievement to which advocates aspire, rather than as a moral realm not of human hard yet discoverable by special persons of particular world views" (2017: 222). Wolfsteller and Gregg note this approach locates the possibility for utopia to be always not-yet, and something driven from below. Utopia is a norm developed by the people, rather than by larger organizing bodies such as the United Nations. A localized approach can contribute to developing local commitments towards a chosen political framework.

Despite these varying approaches, contemporary political theory has moved away from utopia. Utopic thought is thought to present a political praxis that cannot be acted upon, too closely resembles politics as is, or may become overly dogmatic (see: Kateb 1972; Myn 2015; Shklar 1998; Sargent 2010). However, utopic scholars such as Benjamin L. McKean argue the movement away from utopian political theory limits our political imagination. McKean writes, "utopian thinking can orient us to existing political institutions in ways that both track the operations of power and attend to real opportunities for resistance" (2016: 877). Utopia does not need to be a finality. Instead, it can be understood as a political orientation towards the world. It allows us to examine how values are imperfectly applied to the sociopolitical realm and assist us in acting or promoting ways of political action that may promote the realization of political ideals.

McKean's work grapples with contemporary structuralist approaches to politics and how to best integrate utopic thinking into structuralist interpretations of politics. However, if utopia is an ongoing project and orientation towards the world, it may be useful to adopt a post-structuralist approach to politics. The breakage from structuralism to post-structuralism addresses contemporary critiques of utopia as dogmatic. Post-structuralism questions the belief in rigid interpretations of the world and politics which establishes some ideas

and theories as true. Happe and Davis provide a groundwork for examining utopia through a post-structuralist lens. They promote forms of utopic thinking that are grounded in everyday life but encourage considerations and integrations of alternative modalities of political thought. We can find this approach in Nietzsche's theory of *amor fati* which applies a deconstructive approach to politics based upon the necessary disruption of normative thought.

Throughout Nietzsche's work, he routinely refutes normative liberal thought. Eleanor Green notes Nietzsche's refutation of the State and the possibility for any political system or event to manifest utopia. She writes, "even the best-regulated social system is a dry and empty affair unless the spirit within mankind has undergone a revolutionary transformation [...] and a new contact through touch, desire and sensual non-verbal communication with his fellow men" (1974: 152). She argues that Nietzsche understands the State as an invention by suppressed classes. It is an expression of a people who have a will to death, rather than a will to life. The pathway towards utopia necessitates an organic breakage with the State as is. Utopia cannot be imposed by ideas and structures from the past, but rather must be entirely organic and reify oneself.

6. Myth in an Apolline Era

Nietzsche's text *The Birth of Tragedy* lays out an argument for the importance of art, or myth, in life. He contends that life is shaped by dual forces – the one Apolline, ordered reason; the other, Dionysiac, an ecstatic reaction to life. His preference for the Dionysiac prefigures his later theory of the will to life and *amor fati.* Nietzsche argues the sociopolitical world is shaped by myths, and the Apolline seeks to grasp wisdom and the sciences of the world. The Apolline approach is tragic:

> Yet without myth all culture loses its healthy and natural creative power: only a horizon surrounded by myths can unify an entire cultural movement. Myth alone rescues all the powers of imagination [...]. My friends, you who believe in Dionysiac music, you also know what tragedy means to us. In it, reborn from music, we have tragic myth – and in that myth you may hope for everything and forget all that is most painful! (Nietzsche 2003: 109-116).

Myth, rather than reason, is integral to the sociopolitical world and to one's being. The tragic myth may have a painful message, and yet it reveals hope. Nietzsche appeals to the Greeks and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to illustrate the belief that it is ludicrous to seek to restore order to the chaotic world. Understanding

"kills action" in that if a person wants to act in a way to change the world, they must base it upon myths. It is myths that save us, rather than reason.

Nietzsche's later works such as *Beyond Good and Evil* and *The Gay Science* develop the argument he begins in *The Birth of Tragedy.* His later works outline the importance for throwing off the structures of reason and religion which have given structure to the world. The Apolline strictures limit individuals to understanding themselves through modern normative assumptions. Individuals see themselves through Enlightenment rationalism, separated from desire, passion, and instincts. Myth, he argues, is the path to rise about the malaise of modernity. By consciously creating our own myths, we create the world around us. The world cannot exist *without* myth. However, we cannot have *only* myth. We must also radically embrace myth and express this acceptance in the will to life, or will to power.

Nietzsche in *Beyond Good and Evil* states the "Will to Power, which is precisely the Will to Life [...] is the FUNDAMENTAL FACT of all history [...]" (2014: 98). Individuals are driven by an internal passion, and a full life requires an attunement to this passion. Myth cannot be fully disentangled from *amor fati. Amor fati* is simply a love of one's fate, or an embrace of oneself and one's life. Nietzsche's concept advocates moving away from viewing oneself as suffering through the current world. Instead, one should radically accept their life and live in that acceptance. Scholars such as Cobb Stevens (1982), Peter R. Sedgewick (2013), and Susan Stocker (2002) have examined Nietzsche's argument as one that is relevant to people with disabilities. It promotes a view of disability that does not view people with disabilities as tragic figures, and nor does it promote a view of people with disabilities as heroes of their own lives. Rather, it promotes a grounded acceptance of one's life, and can be empowering.

Madness is a part of my life and myself. It is just barely controlled by the medical implant I have for my epilepsy, the Vagus Nerve Stimulator (VNS). It is embedded in my chest with electrodes clipped onto the nerve. It sends pulses of electricity into my brain, soothing its madness and its epileptic tendencies. *My madness is inescapably bound up with my epilepsy. Together they have shaped each other. My seizures were frequently triggered by the over expansion of energy and the bodily stress which is an inherent part of hypomania. Likewise, the depressive episodes in which I had no interest in eating or making food would lower my seizure threshold until I inevitably crossed it.* Sara Ryan and Ulla Räisänen (2012) find that people with epilepsy frequently report feeling a sepa-

ration between mind and body. *My brain feels like an anchor for my mind. Seizures halt my day, the pain crashing me into my physical present. Epilepsy provides a brief reprise from my mind's escape. My mind is effervescent, never quite under my control, and my brain holds it in place, connecting my madness with the electrical bursts and fits of epilepsy. I see my mind and brain as enmeshed in a relationship outside of myself and yet fundamentally me. The ability to divorce myself from both mind and brain is emblematic of having lost my mind. I know what it is to live without my mind.*

Within Ryan and Räisänen's work, bodies are the *thing* that seizes, and minds drift away during seizures. It is as though the mind is a protective force, temporarily whisking away one's consciousness. Perhaps this allows us to navigate our lives having a disability which unpredictably can render us physically vulnerable in a way that counters narratives of disabilities such as epilepsy that are grounded in fear (Valentine 2025). Even as I think of my mind and body as disparate, the physicality of both bipolar and epilepsy disrupts the static categories of body and mind. Moreover, an embracing of both diagnoses and their disruptive power poses these experiences in a different light, one that does not romanticize these diagnoses, but rather orients me towards them from a position of choosing disability.

It would be easy to view the moments when madness ruled my life, and the brief appearances it now makes, as tragic. However, to do so places me in a state where I am victimized by my disabilities. *Amor fati* allows me to live with myself and to radically embrace the disabilities that shape my life. Rachel Adams (2017) discusses the possibility of choosing disability as a way of life in which an individual or society focuses itself upon disabled people and prioritizes their needs. *Amor fati* is a way in which a person may choose disability. They can thereby center their life around positively perceiving their disabilities and refuting internalized stigma and shame. *Amor fati* contributes to an understanding of madness as a possible pathway to political praxis, rather than an affliction.

Nietzsche begins from the premise that suffering is significant. One's response to suffering indicates a moral state. Morality is located internally in how one grapples with suffering. Nietzsche recognizes *all* people suffer in some ways; he describes suffering as integral to the expression of *amor fati:*

> The discipline of suffering, of GREAT suffering – know ye not that it is only THIS discipline that has produced the elevations of humanity hitherto? The tension of the soul in misfortune which communicates to it its energy, its shuddering in view of rack and ruin, its inventiveness and bravery in undergoing,

> enduring, interpreting, and exploiting misfortune, and whatever depth, mystery, disguise, spirit, artifice, or greatness has been bestowed upon the soul – has it not been bestowed through suffering, through the discipline of great suffering? (2014: 74)

The "yes" to suffering leads to further moral development. One's soul will become great, brave, and inventive in its response to suffering. *The first moment of returning from madness, I was wracked by self-pity. I dragged myself into a mental hole, crushed by any wrongs I had possibly committed. It became crippling*: Nietzsche identifies pity as a moral wrong because it harms our soul. Pity is based upon an argument that life should be orderly, easy, and comfortable. If a person shrinks away from difficulty, it robs us of truly attending to our needs. It does not allow us to name and cope with our fate.

Nietzsche challenges interpretations that bodily and mental integrity is all-important. Our illusory views that we have control over our lives and our well-being. He presents a radical response to the distress arising from madness. Rather than dwell in self-pity, I can face tragedy myself. The moment I was diagnosed with a severe form of epilepsy, Lennox Gastaut syndrome, my neurologists believed I would live a life of dependence. Furthermore, as someone with treatment-resistant bipolar, I would forever be trapped in fits of madness and seizures. My life seemed to be one of closed doors, where the only outbursts would be the ones which I would find through madness. In response to this possibility, I shaped the majority of my life by the radical embrace of both these diagnoses, and I have relied upon self-boundaries to reject both pity and prescribed futures. Nietzsche gives an ethic of self-determination and affirmation, which I find integral to using madness as a political praxis.

7. Mad Orientations

Psychotic episodes often occur on threshold moments – moving, beginning college, losing significant relationships among other such other changes. Wallcraft and Hopper note psychotic breaks lead people to redefine life trajectories (2014: 14). The shifts may be painful, and individuals often feel deep pity and grief over these shifts. However, the initial response may fade over time. Individuals do not necessarily succumb to grief after psychotic breakages, and it is important in any account of madness to not discount a person's grief *or* their later positive outlook on their life. To do so would, in Nietzsche's language, be

"putrid." Rather, the psychotic break is a significant moment in which a person must re-orient themselves.

In light of the Madness' destabilization, Mad people have developed mutual aid support networks that seek to provide ways to understand one's diagnosis, the Hearing Voices Network is one such organization. They provide peer support groups for people to process and understand their experiences with others, and "offer an opportunity for people to accept and live with their experiences in a way that helps them regain some power over their lives." The goal of these mutual aid groups is not to act as professionals, but to offer spaces for people to engage with the content of their experiences. They act as ways to reintegrate one's extraordinary experiences into our daily reality.

*My first and only hospitalization was shaped by a frenetic fear. I was experiencing a mixed episode, full of electricity and depression. I thrummed with some divine energy as I struggled to stay above the closing waters of depression. Mixed states are dangerous to the person experiencing them. During these episodes, people are more likely to die by suicide as you are depressed and energetic (*Baldessarini, Pompili & Tondo 2006; Balázs et al. 2006*). The psychiatrist met with me once, appearing annoyed at my lack of reason. Bipolar? Me? It was not difficult to adjust to the diagnosis, as five years before I had been diagnosed with epilepsy. It was another shift, but not as seismic as perhaps expected. Rather, it assisted me in understanding how I related to the world. The world was often incomprehensible. It was riddled in codes that I knew took divine energy to decode, and occasionally I could grasp God's ineffable designs. I was oriented askance to the world, my mind lost to the drive to decode the world. It was only through this decoding that the pathway to a concretized utopia could be found.*

There is no singular answer to *what* madness as political praxis will result in; however, there are numerous instances of Mad individuals organizing to de-pathologize their experiences and to find ways to advance collective care. The Socialist Patients' Collective (SPK) was founded in the 1970 by Wolfgang Huber in West Germany, with the slogan "Turn illness into a weapon." The SPK organized along the lines of "illness," believing that individuals with mental health diagnoses and disabilities are a revolutionary class through their dispossession (Huber 1993). If we begin to organize from the perspective that Mad people are valuable in their own right, and we have experiences which can contribute to rethinking political and social realities, then we are choosing a critical disabilities framework to interrogate and question the everyday.

The Mad person exists within the world and yet without it as well. Experiences of psychosis have the potential to shatter the normative impression of the world. *The moments I lost my mind I was filled with the assurance another world was possible. I felt it deep in my bones, deeper than when I began to theorize the ways in which this could be possible. In many ways, in my sanity I have sought to return to those moments in which the utopic project was clear.* The experiences of both madness and sanity illuminate the need to break away from normative interpretations of the world and to be willing to accept utopia as potentially unknown. Yet this process is not something that all Mad people may be able to participate in. People with bipolar disorder frequently rely on maladaptive coping mechanisms such as: risk-taking, substance use, self-base, rumination, "giving-up," and less seeking support among other techniques (Nitzburg et al. 2016). While a Mad approach to politics may challenge us in considering alternative political and social possibilities, it may also be difficult for Mad people to participate.

Madness is an orientation outside of the world, while inside of it. Nietzsche's philosophy encourages a resounding embrace of one's facticity, and this may include madness. If I am to embrace madness, I am led to embrace what emerges *from* the madness. A political praxis is one such entity. A mad political praxis calls us to orient our political perspectives away from normative experiences of the world. One must engage in the everyday realities of the world; however, in moving towards a new world, one must be willing to shrug off what we have understood as possible. Madness illustrates a new world is possible, graspable, reifiable if only we are to accept that in its formation, we may find it unintelligible. Madness as a political praxis calls us to bravely accept the possibility of failure while holding onto hope. The mind's unpredictability illustrates a potentiality to rise above the world without abandoning it. It is through this orientation that we may, perhaps, revive and continue the utopic project.

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