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Sheri-Marie L. Harrison

University of Missouri, harrisonsl@missouri.edu

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Fighting Madness, Making Caribbeanness

Sheri-Marie Harrison, University of Missouri

Kelly Baker Josephs, *Disturbers of the Peace: Representations of Madness in Anglophone Caribbean Literature* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2013), 191pp.

The proliferation of mad characters in Caribbean fiction at large makes it puzzling that we were a decade into the twenty-first century before the publication of a critical study dedicated entirely to this ubiquitous literary trope, in its own right, as a distinctively Caribbean literary aesthetic. The force of Kelly Baker Josephs' *Disturbers of the Peace: Representations of Madness in Anglophone Caribbean Literature* comes first from this identification of madness as a major, recurring preoccupation of Caribbean writing. Other strengths of this book include the flexible and multifaceted way Josephs treats and analyzes various literary manifestations of madness, her balanced reliance on Caribbean criticism to illuminate the region's texts, and the methodological example she sets for approaching representations of madness in Caribbean fiction beyond the bounds of her own book's focus.

Disturbers of the Peace begins by citing Paul Keens-Douglas' poem "Jus' Like Dat" as a touchstone for establishing the varied and fluid ways in which Josephs will treat representations of madness. Of the poem's arrangement of the word "mad," Josephs asks, "is *mad* the same as mad mad and mad mad mad?" (1). The answer is no; "throughout the poem, Douglass repeatedly plays with the performative aspects of 'losing one's mind,' using the slippages between insanity, anger and excessive gaiety to recreate the physical and mental experience of carnival" (1). Josephs in turn likens these slippages to the larger variation among the representations of madness and mad characters in Caribbean literature.

Josephs identifies the "ubiquity of madmen and madwomen" in Anglophone Caribbean literature written between 1959 and 1980 as one of that period's "distinguishing features." She argues, moreover, that this feature connects the period's literature to the concurrent shift from colonial to postcolonial status also taking place in the region, and that the engagement of madness "serves as both a social critique and a form of literary innovation in these texts" (2). The prevalence of iconic and mad characters like Rhys' Antoinette/Annette, Naipaul's Man-man, Wynter's Moses Barton, and others begs the book's organizing questions: "[w]hat function(s) do these figures serve for the writer and the represented" and how does madness figure in the varying interests inherent in decolonization (2)? In answering these questions, Josephs offers the following as "a major premise of *Disturbers of the Peace*":

... the slow but relatively condensed decolonization of the Anglophone islands during the 1960s and 1970s makes literature written in English during this time – what Mary Lou Emery describes as “the closing of the era of empire” – *especially* rich for an examination of the function of madness in literary critiques of colonialism and the Caribbean project of nation making. (3)

An additional feature that makes “the closing of the era of empire” a rich location for examining the role of madness in critiquing colonialism and nation building is the proliferation of theoretical writing that “began experimenting with routes to social and mental decolonization” in this period (10). *Disturbers of the Peace* situates its readings of literary texts within these contemporary critical discourses, where possible reading primary texts alongside their authors’ critical writing. Chapter One reads *Miguel Street* and Naipaul’s fiction generally in the framework provided by his criticism; Chapter Two places Wynter’s novel *The Hills of Hebron* alongside her vast body of critical work; Chapter Three’s discussion of *Wide Sargasso Sea* utilizes the authorial logic offered by Rhys herself in her letters; Frantz Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth* and Jean Paul Sartre’s preface to that text are contrapuntally pivotal to parsing the schizophrenic delirium of Walcott’s *Dream on Monkey Mountain* in Chapter Four; and Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* animates Chapter Five’s discussion of Brodber’s *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home*. As Josephs rightly asserts, it is fortunate to be able to “turn directly to the authors of the fictional text under consideration for complimentary critical material” (11). But her deliberate pairing of creative and critical works bears additional fruit in the context of representations of madness, illustrating her contention that the “approach to Caribbean narratives of madness facilitates an enhanced synergism between fictional texts on madness and critical writings in Caribbean culture and postcolonial identity” (10).

Another noteworthy organizational feature of Josephs’ book is that its focus on decolonization offers a methodological model for thinking about literary representations of madness beyond the mid twentieth century. This broad applicability is exemplified by the book’s epilogue, which tests the efficacy of the approach to madness that Josephs develops by applying it to contemporary diasporic fiction. If the bulk of the book illuminates the work of madness in literature published between 1959 and 1982, this final chapter focuses on how madness in contemporary literature conveys the challenges of the Caribbean diaspora: “challenges of recognition and reclamation, of revisioning and of remembering, of making a whole out of disparate fragments of a dislocated Caribbean” (162). What may seem initially like a finite period of study – the closing of the colonial era of governance in the Anglophone Caribbean and the

beginnings of postcoloniality and the process of decolonization – allows Josephs to explore the relationship of madness, migration, and diaspora in the New Millennium. Moreover, it allows *Disturbers of the Peace* to assert the trans-historical political stakes of literary representations of madness, and to suggest how this literary trope continues to feature prominently (albeit differently) in the contemporary era.

Across five chapters and an epigraph, Josephs examines a variety of texts – short prose, novels, criticism and drama – which include besides the ones I have already mentioned Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth*, Marie-Elena John’s *Unburnable*, and David Chariandy’s *Soucouyant*. Where it is not possible to pair an author’s critical and creative work, Caribbean critical discourses at large (the work of critics like Frantz Fanon and Eduard Glissant in particular) provide the optics through which Josephs reads her primary texts. These critical and creative pairings deepen the reader’s understanding of how the fictional rendering of madness informs each author’s body of work and Caribbean literary and critical discourses at large.

While this approach delivers consistently illuminating insights throughout the book, for me the most enlightening of these is the parallel Josephs draws between *Miguel Street*’s Man-man and *Mimic Men*’s Gurudeva in Chapter One. Generally, this chapter “examines the connections between the ambivalent view of the soon-to-be sovereign Caribbean and Naipaul’s representations of resistance as minor neurotic manifestations and outright ‘mental trouble’ in *Miguel Street*” (24). It does this to begin addressing the utility of madness in spaces on the verge of political independence. To do this Josephs reads the manifestations of madness in *Miguel Street* in parallel with madness in *Mimic Men*, and both through the Trinidad chapter in *The Middle Passage*. She positions her discussion alongside Naipaul’s early preoccupation with the uncertainties and sometimes absurdities of colonial life to argue that “the stories of characters such as Man-man and Laura question European models of success and sanity” (25). The intertextual parallel Josephs draws between Gurudeva and Man-man offers a fuller picture of the purposes madness serves not only in Naipaul’s body of work, but also within the community itself and the larger Trinidadian milieu. Josephs’ argument also works to counter what is often read as *Miguel Street*’s (and indeed Naipaul’s) frustrating pessimism.

The now iconic figure of the popular (often denounced as mad) religious leader in the early twentieth century resonates not only with the mental dis-ease of the figure himself, but also with that of his followers who in turn reflect a more general dis-ease in the society as a whole. That this figure, as he recurs across the literature of the period, is rooted in historical figures like Alexander Bedward and his Jamaica Native Free Baptist Church speaks to the more general turmoil within

the region as it shifts towards independence and decolonization.¹ As Josephs suggests, “despite remaining unfulfilled, the promise held by figures such as Man-man and Gurudeva for the possibility of revolt represents an optimistic, albeit incomplete, move on Naipaul’s part in his early work” (35). Indeed,

[d]espite the sometimes comedic and ironic results, Naipaul’s continuous return to the figure of the Messiah/religious leader/politician in works such as *The Mystic Masseur*, *Miguel Street*, and *Mimic Men* evidences his attempt to fathom the meaning behind this mystery and its implications for those who consider themselves sane. (35)

While “the performative and political nature of Man-man’s madness foregrounds the instability of the Caribbean at the threshold of a desired yet undetermined future,” it also portrays the tenuous nature of colonial rules and the limitations they place on colonial subjects (43). In his continued contestation of elections and the fact that he receives three votes each time, Man-man disrupts “the safety of pretense in colonial relationships.” In this and other ways Man-man and Gurudeva “point out the tenuousness of social consent and the meaninglessness of adhering to rules when one is the colonial (43).” As *Miguel Street* shows through its various characters, adhering to the rules is more often than not a futile and ultimately maddening endeavor, but one that is fatalistically accepted as part and parcel of colonial reality.

If Chapter One’s discussion of the utility of madness portrays Naipaul’s visions of colonial and postcolonial realities as ultimately too pessimistic to provide a way forward, Chapter Two’s discussion of *The Hills of Hebron*, Wynter’s only novel, shows how madness works as a generative space from which postcoloniality can grow. Madness features variously in this chapter’s discussion of the novel as temporary, empowering, regenerative, and—ultimately—a necessary and productive refuge. Thus, “[w]hile the potential leaders of the novel – Moses, Obadiah, and Kate – are marked as mad, the novel situates this insanity as a necessary, and necessarily temporary, stage in the development of successful visionaries” (47). Wynter, Josephs argues, “employs diverse figurations of madness to map the problematics of an emerging nation” (46).

Josephs’ identification of Aunt Kate as among the potential leaders in Hebron is a striking divergence from earlier discussions that either gloss over or even ignore Kate entirely when analyzing the feminist politics and leadership possibilities the novel. Her reading of Kate is thus a welcome addition to the

¹ See A. A. Brooks, *History of Bedwardism, Or, The Jamaica Native Baptist Free Church, Union Camp, Augustown, St. Andrew, Ja., B.W.I*, Enlarged 2nd edition (Gllaner [i.e. Gleaner] Co, n.d.).

criticism that treated the character as either an object of pity or, at best, a supporting character rather than a leader.² In Josephs' revisionist argument, Kate is as significant as Obadiah and Moses in the novel's engagement with how gender functions in the shaping of a new nation. This significance rests in the fact that Kate is "everywhere, often knows more than the other characters and is crafty even in her madness." Indeed more significantly, Josephs suggests that "Aunt Kate's strategic escape via madness parallels the communal escape via religion" (61). Understanding Kate in this way is key to understanding the argument Josephs makes about the much-discussed role Wynter imagines gender plays in postcolonial nation building. For Josephs, "[w]omen are not lost, forgotten, or ignored in Wynter's work; she reads the nation and race, and later the human through women, without treating gender as an additive" (61). By taking up Wynter's fictional and theoretical engagements with gender and the reinvention of humanism as essential facets of decolonization, this chapter provides a striking analysis of the novel's depiction of madness as an enabling and necessary component in the transition from a colonial to postcolonial state.

If representations of madness in Wynter's novel enable the recouping of the national allegory as an interpretative and representational trope from postcolonial writing, Josephs' third chapter offers another remarkable possibility in considering madness: reading *Wide Sargasso Sea* as doing something much more sweeping than simply providing a corrective to *Jane Eyre*. The chapter takes its title – "Fighting Mad" from a 1958 letter Rhys wrote to her friend Selma Vaz Diaz explaining her desire to re-write the story of the "Creole lunatic" in *Jane Eyre*. In the letter, Rhys tells Diaz, "I'm fighting Mad to write *her* story." Josephs opens the chapter by arguing that the phrase "fighting mad...reveals Rhys' position vis-à-vis *Jane Eyre* and its century of readership. In writing *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys had to contend with the established readings of Rochester's mad wife and her legacy of lunacy" (70). *Wide Sargasso Sea* can thus be read figuratively as Rhys' "struggle with the literary method of 'fighting' the earlier established representation of Bertha's madness" (70). Rather than Bertha herself, Rhys' novel in this way fights with the established body of English literary discourses that consigns madness to Bertha and the Caribbean.

Josephs turns to Rhys despite the fact that her body of work spans thirty years prior to the publication of *Wide Sargasso Sea* and is discussed more often in

² See Shirley Toland-Dix, "The Hills of Hebron : Sylvia Wynter's Disruption of the Narrative of the Nation," *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism*, no. 25 (February 2008): 57–76; Janice Lee Lidell, "The Narrow Enclosure of Motherdom/Martyrdom: A Study of Gatha Randall Barton in Sylvia Wynter's *The Hills of Hebron*," in *Out of the Kumbula: Caribbean Women and Literature*, ed. Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1990); Natasha Barnes, "Reluctant Matriarch: Sylvia Wynter & the Woman Question," in *Cultural Conundrums Gender, Race, Nation, and the Making of Caribbean Cultural Politics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 135–73.

criticism of modernist than of Caribbean novels. These facts, along with the latter novel's inattention to independence or decolonization, unlike the other works under examination in *Disturbers of the Peace*, do not preclude it for her purposes, because Josephs claims that despite these differences Rhys' book "utilizes representations of madness to directly confront European conceptions of the Caribbean and Caribbean peoples" (70). Indeed, while the other texts discussed seem to address the specifically localized concerns that attend decolonization processes, *Wide Sargasso Sea* poses a challenge to coloniality that is "directed outward" and thus "as necessary in this period of decolonization as the visualizations of a new nation found in, for example, Sylvia Wynter's *The Hills of Hebron* or Derek Walcott's *Dream of Monkey Mountain*" (71). Josephs situates this necessity in *Wide Sargasso Sea*'s "figurations of madness," which she describes as "fraught with questions of colonial identity, place, and order. She argues that "[v]ia representations of Antoinette's, her mother's, and her husband's madness, the novel determinedly resists the categories and hierarchies that colonialism depends on for power and perpetuation" (71).

Chapter Four's discussion of Derek Walcott's play, *Dream On Monkey Mountain*, follows on this revisionist account of *Wide Sargasso Sea* by aligning dreams and madness as central to cohesion in the postcolonial Caribbean. This chapter begins by describing Walcott's play as a "mosaic of folklore connected by fantasy" which in turn "creates space for the newness that will allow for the psychological and material shaping of a Caribbean community." Josephs argues that "Walcott organizes the folkloric elements within the hallucinations of the play's protagonist, Makak, allowing dreams and madness to create the glue that produces a cohesive Caribbeanness in the play" (93). Moreover, whereas Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* addresses English literary discourses in a supplementary rather than revisionary or corrective capacity, in *Dream on Monkey Mountain* "Walcott positions himself as participating in a Caribbean aesthetic, as building in the Caribbean, not in a larger diasporic tradition" (93).

As in her discussion of Wynter's *The Hills of Hebron*, Josephs reads Walcott's play's representations of madness as generative. The force of this critique rests in situating the chapter's discussion of the play in discourses of psychopathology and Sartre's preface to Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*. Josephs admits that "[t]he use of Sartre's summarizing of Fanon's ideas rather than the direct quotation of Fanon may be read as problematic, but it represents the split between worlds that the colonial feels." For Josephs, the discussion of schizophrenic representations in the play is mirrored in the split between Sartre's and Fanon's voices in *Wretched of the Earth*: "the juxtaposition of the European speaking for the colonial with Makak attempting to speak for himself exemplifies the split that Walcott describes in the play itself" (107). An additional provocative feature of this chapter is its reading of the play as effacing cohesion, order and

narrative denouement, and its suggestion that these aesthetics are more representative of the movement of collective decolonization than closure. Thus, “[w]hile it offers definite commentaries on black consciousness and Eurocentrism, the play, with its source in the multiplicity and contradictions of metaphor and its reliance on dreams and madness, resists stable meanings” (117). Josephs questions the valorization of reality and sanity concretized in colonial discourses via a reading of Walcott’s play that shows how “the play,” and the Caribbean itself, “in the end, cannot escape these divisions between sanity and madness, reality and dream” (118).

Josephs continues her discussion of the relationship between madness and aesthetics in Chapter Five by considering *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home*’s representation of madness “from a tangled first-person perspective” (119). Unlike the writers discussed in previous chapters, “Brodber bypasses the difficulty of speaking *about* the alienation of the colonial subject; instead, she directly tackles the project of speaking from and through this space of alienation” (119). More specifically, this chapter “examine[s] how Brodber grapples with the effects of these expectations on mental health as well as how she imaginatively tackles the difficulty of describing madness with the ‘language of reason’ within commonly recognized generic literary boundaries and from a first-person perspective” (119). Brodber’s novel is specifically apt for this inquiry, because her goal in writing *Jane and Louisa* was to create a text that could be incorporated as a fictional case study for social work students in Jamaica as they worked at negotiating more localized mental health problems. Josephs quotes Brodber as saying she “felt that [her] examination of Jamaican society could not be written from the standpoint of the objective outside observer communicating to disinterested scholars” (128). In this logic, which resonates with the scene in *The Hills of Hebron* where the white judge sees madness in the black and brown barristers masquerading in European trappings of civility (wigs and the law), Brodber’s fictive text “simultaneously makes a case for the validity of the native perspective and the naïve scientist’s definition of what may be considered ‘mad’ in the contexts of his or her culture” (128). Josephs here shows how “*Jane and Louisa* questions the factuality of case studies, and the text itself becomes a case study for the impossibility of removing the researcher’s biases from her work” (128).

Brodber’s text also expands the critical perspective of *Disturbers of the Peace* as a whole by “shift[ing] the focus from the tensions between black/Jamaican and white/American/British to that between Jamaicans themselves” (129). Moreover, as in Chapter Two’s discussion of *The Hills of Hebron*, gender also plays an important role this chapter. According to Josephs, Brodber considers in this novel “the alienating effects of ‘those in the yard’ on the female subject, particularly the westernized female subject who returns home and cannot find her

place” (129). Though they occur in various places throughout *Disturbers of the Peace* – in Chapters One and Two in particular – this chapter most explicitly considers the connections among madness, religion, and education in the Caribbean. According to Josephs, “it is not surprising... that so many representations of madness in Caribbean literature are figured in relation to religion and education.” As in other places throughout the book, Josephs reiterates here that “it is also in these arenas that the germs of resistance can be found” (134).

Josephs’ epilogue, “Madness and Migration in the New Millennium” concludes the book in the following way:

...madness provided Caribbean writers with a language for exploring the shifts in subjectivity that necessarily accompanied independence. The images and metaphors of this language – messiahs, dreams, schizophrenias – repeat throughout the texts published in the mid-twentieth century as writers map the internal psychic landscape of the colonized and recently decolonized Caribbean subject. (144)

The crux of recognizing madness as a metaphoric language in Caribbean literary discourses rests in its applicability beyond the historical temporalities of colonization and decolonization. Josephs works in this final part of her book to demonstrate not only that madness continues to play a major role in Caribbean literature, but also that twenty-first century writers of the Caribbean diaspora continue to rely on representations of madness as a medium for portraying changing realities. The shift to a discussion of not only contemporary texts, but also diasporic ones focused on migrancy, underwrites Josephs’ argument that an aesthetic shift is occurring in the Caribbean literary landscape. “The Caribbean aesthetic is shifting” she says, “from a regional sensibility to a diasporic one” (147). This is not intended to discount writers who are located in the Caribbean itself, or to argue that earlier generations of writers did not sometimes write from “elsewhere,” but rather to register what Josephs shows in her analysis of contemporary texts “to be a definite shift in the relationship to the signifier *Caribbean* when it comes to literary production” (147). For Josephs, the novels discussed in the epilogue continue a long aesthetic tradition that employs madness to characterize and demonstrate shifts in historical, political, and social realities in the Caribbean. Moreover the worlds portrayed in the diasporic narratives of migrancy under examination in the epilogue “include not only the perpetual process of decolonization – with its attendant questions of race, gender and class – but also the distress of displacement and the futility of any notion of return” (145).

Beyond expanding her project's geographical and temporal scope, Josephs' discussion of *White Teeth's* in particular evinces *Disturbers of the Peace's* larger critiques of neoliberal realities and their organizing cultural logics; in the case of Zadie Smith's book the neoliberal logic under scrutiny is multiculturalism. Josephs thus argues that "involvement ... serves as a driving force in shaping the narrative of *White Teeth*," in the present and the past of the novel. The source of this inescapable and maddening involvement is "the colonizing enterprise that brings [all its characters] to this metropole so that their lives rub so intimately and maddeningly against each other, giving the impression of reducing divisions even as they emphasize them" (162). If there is one thing that I would have liked to see more of in Josephs' consideration of contemporary diasporic novels, it is a more explicit sense of the ways the shift defined in the epilogue from a regional to a diasporic vision of Caribbean realities also resonates with the shift in literary criticism at large towards the cultural logics that attend global neoliberal economics.

Caribbean studies has been waiting for a comprehensive study that brings together such enigmatic and deranged though no less compelling figures in the Caribbean literary landscape as Man-man, Gurudeva, Moses Barton, and Antoinette. Josephs' book rewardingly resists formulaic and worn assumptions about the work madness does in Caribbean literature, expands inquiry beyond the confines of attributing or even reversing value, and gives a logic for reading madness as simultaneously a temporally specific yet trans-historical aesthetic trope. What is made clear in the book's carefully laid out, complex, and nuanced discussion is that madness in Caribbean writing is definitive; it "defines community, defines gender, defines the form of the text, and for some characters, defines reality itself" (9). In laying out these functional terms for thinking about madness, Josephs also demonstrates a methodological practice with relevance far beyond its application in *Disturbers of Peace*.