

Unhinged: Zoom, Crisis, Disabling Communication in the Ivy League

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Abstract

Unhinged evokes how institutions of higher learning police their boundaries through codes of professionalism and sanity. It examines what kinds of bodies and minds are permitted to walk across campus grounds, to take up an office, enter a classroom, present research, speak in a Zoom meeting. Hiring a Mad scholar means more than ticking the requisite diversity box. The presence of madness within a scholarly setting disrupts boundaries between reason and unreason, between legitimacy and illegitimacy, between what should be heard and what should be silenced. The essay considers specifically a moment of failed listening, when assumptions were made about what a mad person means, as if she has no say in defining herself and her needs. What results is not a theoretical intervention into a given text, but into a living moment: the ethics of care within academic settings and the difficult translation of conceptual framework from page to face.

This lyrical meditation ultimately imagines what madness might have to offer the forums of academia, what listening to madness might teach us about the signifying resonance of unordinary linguistics and why a sentence uttered in an international atrocity might need to break. The analysis subverts assumptions of pathology and risk, revealing how the negation of a madwoman's agency and voice is itself a danger.

Keywords: Madness; psychosis; disability; consent; listening; Zoom.

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“This is what a wrong would be: a damage accompanied by the loss of the means
to prove the damage.”

— Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend*, 1989, p. 5.

She seemed apologetic when she showed me the room. I had arrived a month early on this now languorous campus unfolding green, professors in shorts, students squinting at pages that glinted sun, and this was the only office that would be available. The administrative assistant led me to the third floor, at the very back, a corner like a secret. It was mine: pale pink slanting walls, an attic nook, and gold bees in the alcove that opened to a curved, pointed window overlooking a hill. The bees were stenciled, a gift left by a former postdoctoral scholar who had been studying their intricate culture, but the imagery seemed a glossy code. Tiny magic, this punning reminder to exist, simply, in this room, to relish the grace of this year, lucky card I had somehow pulled from a precarious deck. Here stretched a view of the campus from inside a quiet respite against all that busyness below: my eccentric room fit intricately within the university’s domain and remained distinct from it, offering both community and retreat. This office had once been the maid’s quarters, and I would later learn it was a fraction of the size of my soon-to-be-colleagues’ offices, but I felt good and right and whole in this luminous pink space above the steep staircase that the help had used, their downstairs drudgery polishing floors for leather soles or washing dishes in the humid clatter of the kitchen, before weariness climbed back up again in darker hours to this small privacy where they might have slept. I felt their dreams. I felt my nana’s presence, cleaning lady when everyone knew the moneyed dignity of *lady* did not apply, her grit and her lack of education that prompted me to protect my own, and her courage — for I had applied to this university to research trauma-induced psychosis, and in my application I had stated that I would weave autobiography together with theory, not just using reason to read madness, but using my own madness to analyze the theoretical texts. Psychosis to me was not pathological diagnosis, but compelling, elevated if uneven corner from which to think, to see. A disabled mind not a diversity box to check but a mode of intellectual inquiry, the possibility of unusual and vivid contribution. Here I had arrived: a madwoman tucked inside the attic.¹ My hours would open inside this blushing glow. Everything, I thought, had changed. Each day when I emerged from this slanted room to join my colleagues in a seminar or a lecture or a meal, to laugh with them instead of alone, to speak and be heard, to listen and nod and offer my response, not separated from others but welcomed inside their intelligent murmur, their elegant credible degreed human enclave, I sensed the power of each step I took down the vertiginous staircase.

“Stop your drunk shaking nonsense.”

“You are not welcome here.”

“I mean it. Don’t come back.”

These were the statements I wanted to stamp out with each stride in my yellow heels. When in my PhD program I had exhibited symptoms of psychosis — words ricocheting without coherence within an institution where I had been known for years, antipsychotic drugs trembling my limbs and slurring my speech — these were the statements a professor tossed as stark and

1. My opening invokes a classic feminist text on the madwoman in the attic as a figure in Victorian literature written by white women: *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century*, by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (2020/1979).

startling as cold water. Through a series of such statements and non-statements — that simple turning away from a face that scholars seem so capable of doing — I was eventually removed by police from any hallowed academic realm and held without freedom in a psych ward for three months, not a single professor or student or staff in my department ever crossing the threshold or so much as sending an e-mail. A barrier had been erected between the room of reason and the room for the insane, and I was to know which one I occupied.

But those events had occurred on another campus, in another country, long ago. And now, here in this office, I belonged. At this university I had arrived not as a student, but a postdoctoral teacher: I was instructing others to *listen* to psychosis, to *read* the structure of madness within the work of such writers as Toni Morrison or Gayl Jones: impossible yearning reveals the splitting mind of a hurting child; temporal and spatial kaleidoscope communicates a caught woman's escape; interior speech mutters in staccato dialogue as consciousness taunts itself; stubborn dandelions or the Y-shaped crack on the sidewalk resonate almost animate in their consolations or their threats; violence echoes and warps like jazz notes gone wrong; voices rise incantatory as memory swoops and falls, the mad tempo of sentences running fast then slow or breaking entirely, punctuation's guidance suddenly vanished, words themselves in pieces, letters without their words, oppressive meanings cracking as sound slips away from the constraint of sense.

I proposed to illustrate how writers signify through the figures and rhythms of madness what otherwise cannot be expressed.² I proposed to research how psychoanalysis both needs psychosis at its centre and needs the psychotic to remain outside the office doors.³

In my first month, summer lull before I was officially being paid, the administrative assistant asked for an emergency contact. I hesitated. Usually I give my mother's name, but she had

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2. The trope of the madwoman functions within French feminist traditions that situate mad language as feminist resistance to patriarchal form and meaning: see pivotal text "Laugh of the Medusa," by Hélène Cixous (1976). Contemporary works that address the literary functions of madness in Black writing — as colonial injury, as psychic archive, as disorienting testimony, as reorienting refusal: Theri Alyce Pickens' *Black Madness: Mad Blackness, Madness* (2019), Caroline A. Brown and Johanna X. K. Harvey's (Eds.) *Madness in Black Women's Diasporic Fictions* (2017), Bénédicte Ledent, Evelyn O'Callaghan and Daria Tunca's (Eds.) *Madness in Anglophone Caribbean Literature: On the Edge* (2018), and Sarah Jane Cervenak, *Wandering: Philosophical Performances of Racial and Sexual Freedom* (2014). For a key text that explains the concept of sanism and its bond with anti-black racism, see: "An Introduction to Anti-Black Sanism," *Global Journal of Social Work Analysis, Research, Polity, and Practice*, by Sonia Meerai, Idil Abdillahi, and Jennifer Poole (2016). For a work that situates literary analysis of madness in relation to disability studies, see: *Literatures of Madness: Disability Studies and Mental Health* (2018), edited by Elizabeth Donaldson, in which my essay "Writing Madness in Indigenous Literature: A Hesitation" examines the role of madness as reparative force against the violence of colonial reason. Finally, see also related forthcoming titles: *How to Go Mad Without Losing Your Mind: Madness and Black Radical Creativity* (2020), by La Marr Jurelle Bruce; *Madwomen in Social Justice Movements, Literature and Art* (2020), by Jessica Lowell Mason and Nicole Crevar (Eds.), and finally *The Futures of Neurodiversity* (Forthcoming), by Elizabeth J. Donaldson, Ralph Savarese, and Melanie Yergeau (Eds.), in which I have an essay that analyzes the specific forms of facilitating dialogue that can take place in mad encounters deemed to be a crisis.
 3. Sigmund Freud asserted that people who experience psychosis could not be psychoanalyzed, yet his thinking on the unconscious suggests psychotic interplay at work within the dreaming mind: see Jacqueline de Oliveira Moreira and Carlos R. Drawin's "Possible Relation Between the Psychosis and the Unconscious: A Review of 'The Unconscious' by Freud," *Frontiers in Psychology* (2015). Two psychoanalysts who explicitly *do* welcome the psychotic patient into their practices and into their thinking on psychoanalytic insight are Françoise Davoine and Christopher Bollas, both of whom argue that listening to psychosis would require the practice of psychoanalysis to crack open. See Françoise Davoine's "The Characters of Madness in the Talking Cure", *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* (2007), and Christopher Bollas *Catch Them Before They Fall: The Psychoanalysis of Breakdown* (2015) and *When the Sun Bursts: The Enigma of Schizophrenia* (2015).

reached her eighties with a genetic vulnerability to stroke and she lived in Canada, so far from being able to provide support, and I wanted to buffer her from potential worry that would arise with a sudden American call. But my reluctance stemmed too from my sense that if I were to exhibit psychotic symptoms, the administrative team would need more than a contact number. They would need a plan.

No police, this was my opening rule. I did not need handcuffs to the hospital. I did not need the hospital at all. Whiteness had protected my life, but hadn't kept me from being locked away or the ongoing psychic repercussions of carceral care. I had found other effective methods of treatment, therapeutic and otherwise: I now had years of practice negotiating my symptoms, learning to wade through the roughest tides, steadying my mind so that inner waters do not rise too fast. What I needed, in the event of a crisis, was simply to be walked home, talked with, listened to, maybe offered some help getting food. I might have trouble reading street signs, I explained. I might struggle to understand money. I would still trust these women, even if my language began to tumble. I would recognize faces. I would be no danger to myself. On this afternoon of such unusual hospitality for the madwoman who had somehow entered the campus, these two kind women listened with respect, and nodded, *no police*, they assured me, and I gave them the name and number of a friend, my emergency contact, this gesture of sharing offered to the administrative staff who wanted to offer care in the event that I would need it.⁴

The thing I failed to explain — at least with enough specificity and power that my words would hold, not just then but in the future — was what, in fact, would constitute a crisis. When precisely would an emergency contact need to be the one to speak? What was my madness and when would it swell beyond my grasp? Could I be the one to define it? A madwoman — can she be trusted to know herself? When would that trust slip away? At that desk, with the administrative staff, could we have predicted what might, in my mind, go awry and how it would appear to others if it did? Could I retain any interpretive abilities, any authority at all, over my own meaning once my mind began its wayward journey? What might mad knowledge be? Or do the words *madness* and *knowledge* negate each other? I had failed to predict, as I drew my chart of action, that once I had used the term *psychosis* in relation to myself — once I had begun to work openly with my academic colleagues under that banner — then I would lose control of my own attempts at reference. The madwoman, apparently by definition, does not know what or when her madness is. The madwoman signifies what others say she does. She can use words, sure she can. But others are to decide precisely how and if she is heard. Once a decision is made — this sane decision — then madness is what she means. Insanity becomes her only room.

What then can a crisis plan, written by a madwoman, capture? It certainly could not have predicted the virus that would disassemble our routines, the outer doors on campus locked so none of us could enter our offices, no coffee no lectures no students, the bustling town shrinking grey and quiet, each of us at home in front of pixel hunger. Our isolation, our disorientation, in those first weeks especially — I can say it was not unlike psychosis, the strangeness of new blank streets, those tipping empty hours. We all cusped madness as we clung to a world we could no longer reach but hoped one day to return to find.

The week before the news that the campus would close due to COVID-19, my colleagues met for two hours to discuss three of my essays. For these research seminars, I was always meticulously prepared, impeccably dressed, as gracious and poised as I could possibly be. See how

4. The possibility that the stranger might be mad is articulated as the very crisis of hospitality in Anne Dufourmantelle and Jacques Derrida's *Of Hospitality* (2000). See also my critique of their use of the madman as figure, forthcoming in *Topia: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies*.

well I play among you? This day I had been up since five, reviewing my analysis, so that no question would surprise. We gathered in the wide white room at the long wooden table, unaware how our fates would soon turn. It would be the last time I saw us together, comfort of laughter and mugs, a compliment to a new haircut, a tired story of a waking child. We gathered in our seats. We shifted from our morning rush to the rigorous spoken paragraphs of our accustomed academic style. I had chosen that date for my presentation, March 4th, because I liked the homonym — this risk would be a marching forth. I was sharing with my colleagues such vulnerable work. One essay was a meditation on what it means to be a neighbour to someone who is experiencing madness — what we might do or say, as a neighbour, before the police, instead of police. It begins with my search for a wedding, my own wedding, when no such event was taking place, and the spontaneous kindness of a taxi driver who managed to hear me with such attunement, playing with my words as they bounced. How might others attend with equivalent curiosity and sensitivity to the jagged, poetic associations of a mind unfurling? The second essay addressed involuntary injections within a psych ward and explored the issue of consent as it applies to a disabled person. Can consent be negotiated, even through madness? How imagine this possibility? Do I have a right to be mad, when rights themselves are explicitly grounded in reason? Will you speak to me instead of about me? Will you look me in the eye? The final essay — which I had my colleagues read aloud, one by one around the room their alternating voices shaping my words — was a new work, tender text as yet unpublished, paradoxical paragraphs that addressed my experience of solitary confinement, arms and legs cuffed to a bed. Yet it cannot be spoken, I argued, that experience. The moment you communicate it, you are not in solitary — do you understand? The act of language itself inverts its effort. The woman in that room can reach no one. Solitary confinement can never be shared.

And here I was, there I was, in a university, at the table with my colleagues, my periwinkle suit a bit mad but not too mad, and they were nodding, elaborating on my claims, they were letting me know through each excited and intelligent response that my words, even my words that knotted sense, were reaching them.

The director said the essays brought him to tears. *You don't need the quotations*, he told me. *Adorno, the state of exception, you don't need those references. We get it through the story*, he announced with such surprising intensity. *The theory is in your words*.

He hoped our scholarly group could meet one last time, at the beginning of the COVID isolation. I wrote him privately to suggest such gathering might not be the best idea. I empathized with his longing for togetherness and for normalcy, his ordinary denial in the face of what we all were not quite ready to accept. In the end, this meeting was cancelled. Every other meeting, the entire length of the term, would occur on Zoom. *Zoom*, this word of such ready ease that I had never heard before March, word of so much energy and movement that brings no one to my kitchen, just the screen of face-boxes that freeze occasionally, mouth perpetually open in a small electronic death. *Come on and ZOOM ZOOM ZOOM-a ZOOM!* urged the theme song of a 1970s show my sister and I used to watch sprawled on the shag carpet, static of electric company its hollow offering, our faces in its glow, our minds lulled by an hour of frenetic TV boredom for no reason other than it was between two shows we really wanted to see. And Zoom of our research meetings retained this limbo status, the shoddy production values, the threat it could be hacked, how we were frequently late because the microphone wouldn't work, the video wouldn't work, the link wouldn't work, the password wouldn't work, and yet Zoom was there, waiting, ready to be filled by the human, like a hallucination that needs us to believe it exists.

One day in Zoomland I made the mistake of scheduling a therapy session just before our

research meeting. Therapy was on Zoom. The research meeting was on Zoom. There was nowhere I had to reach, no dash across campus, no laptop to carry or umbrella to tuck into a stand. So it seemed possible, to have a therapy appointment end at 11:00 a.m. and begin an academic meeting at 11:00 a.m., to switch from one form of listening to another. To experience a therapist sitting with me in collaborative attention to psychic unknowing, how she nodded without impatience at words reluctant then urgent, a stopping and starting, fragments and repetitions crumbling open what there is to fear — and then to be amongst those who have necessarily learned, better than I have, just how to maintain and defend a university's mental architecture. How hard could it be? My therapy session addressed the cascade of anguish I was feeling in response to the calls I had received that week — calls of loss, from a Black friend who is an intellectual soul mate, and an Inuvialuit friend who calls me sister, the kinds of loss I would speak in a therapy session and not an academic meeting. But when there is no room that one departs at the end of a private hour, and no university room then to enter, no gap between the first space and the next, how does the brain know to shift its vocabularies and rhythms, its loyalties and its mourning and its fight? I did not betray their stories, these friends who had trusted me with them. But something started to splinter, a new old shattering, shards of intergenerational heartbreak inside the well-educated corridors of my mind. I could not enter the Zoom room. I sent a panicked e-mail to all my colleagues. The administrative staff issued another link and by then I was half an hour late. I could see only three colleagues on the screen. Shouldn't there be twenty-six, or something close to it? But all I viewed were three faces. The error is so easy to identify now that I am more fluent with the Zoom platform — how to chat in a window, how to raise a hand, mute or unmute oneself, turn video on or off, but at this time Zoom was a new room for me, and I did not know how to read it.

“I come from people who are heroin addicts and in prison, people who are alcoholics, poor people, violent men.”

This fact I announced, in this elite research seminar, in the rarified space and time I had so carefully earned on a university campus where buildings are lined with ivy. But no — I didn't announce it in that physical place. As I careered from therapy session to scholarly sharing, I enunciated this odd sentence, shame of my worry, directly to those squares of digital faces as if I had been zoomed not to the expected academic encounter and not even to a counseling appointment but straight to yet another room, a Narcotics Anonymous meeting where I would sit picking at my fingernails while I eyed my brother who in this memory had just stopped using, tracks still branching his arms. I was not with my brother. I was not with my friends. I was not with my therapist. I was with my academic colleagues. And I was not even really with them. *I'm having trouble reading*, I blurted, after I had inexplicably introduced the ragged reality of my kinship, because somehow I needed to make the crisis viscerally speakable, not the crisis of a closed campus but of a virus that was killing people in cramped quarters, killing people with pre-existing conditions, killing people without medical insurance, killing prisoners and drug users and the homeless, killing Indigenous people disproportionately, and Black people, disproportionately — the cold measurement of the term *proportion* in this recipe of breathlessness that buckles bodies in grief.

What I presented in the Zoom room was not a considered theoretical reflection on oppression or an academic nod toward the unfortunate have-nots. Something was beginning to crack. And I continued — the discussion that day referenced the loss of Haudenosaunee languages. And this collective settler analysis about a genocidal disappearance — can we have this conversation on this Zoom these three faces how many other faces why are there only three in the Zoom

room who is disappearing how have they died how do I speak without rupture? When there are no Haudenosaunee among us? Where was the discussion of Haudenosaunee research, I wanted to know. What of their ethics? Their citational practices? Their rhetorics and uses of irony and frames of knowledge, their cultural protocols that structure how research should be created and how it can or cannot be shared? They are missing. Why is none of them here?⁵

I was getting rather agitated, in the Zoom room where there were no boundaries between one world and another, between those who crossed a campus and those who never would, between bodies who were with us on this earth and those who were nothing now but photographs as two-dimensional as this flickering screen. I was expressing too much to the three faces why only three faces where had everyone gone? I was not raising my electronic hand.

No boundaries — and yet: a border total for the Haudenosaunee whose land had long been taken through carceral settler practices that created schoolrooms for some and not for others, a border absolute for the Black enslaved people whose hands tilled academia's very wealth that spreads as sturdy as the concrete underneath neo-Gothic reach.⁶

Did I say all of this? Did I communicate any of this? Where was the saying? When did it belong? I know I began with the reference to my family, all of them so distant, faces and voices and gestures like those I'd never see on this campus, where was this campus? I know I quoted my mother, scholar of nothing, teacher of no one, grade-ten alumni who had something to explain to these professors about language and its tilting if they would only listen. I would voice her into the room, her own dream of university now only this small screen, mine, at home.

Words more creature than daughter, bee buzz, loyal blur, syllables a darting embodied map leading somewhere.

In aviation, to *zoom* is to move closer. But no one moved close. I could see no jaw tighten, could feel no nudge of a knee under the table. I caught not one of the familiar gestures of discomfort that would cue me to hush. And no eye glance or sympathetic laughter that would assure me someone understood my critique or that they would talk with me afterwards in the bathroom. You who are in marginal positions in a university know exactly what I mean. You who need your meanings braced when you present what the more powerful don't grasp. You who want to burst into rapid-fire rage when an academic analysis is so white it could be slicked with mayonnaise. The gesture of companionship, the gesture of resistance: the teeth suck, the eye roll, the glance down, the tight mouth. Body word that says *this is some bullshit*. Body recognition that says *I get you, I hear you*. Who heard me?

We washed our hands of a killing virus and the political atrocity bound to it like the limbs of a lover, and we funneled emotion into a conversation metered by electric hands, paced in a modulated tone, in a polite manner, with measured speed, with legitimate citations, without

5. To read a Haudenosaunee author's thinking on madness and its relationship to colonialism, see Alicia Elliott's *A Mind Spread Out on the Ground* (2019). Kelly Lake Cree author Tracey Lindberg's novel *Birdie* (2015) not only reveals how colonial trauma affects the mind but also how acts of kinship can repair it. *Heart Berries* (2018) by Terese Mailhot of the Seabird Island Band reveals madness in response to colonial and inter-generational violence, all through a literary form that itself breaks down and through.

6. On land-grant universities created for the education of settlers: "The [1862] Morrill Act was a wealth transfer disguised as a donation. The government took land from Indigenous people that it had paid little or nothing for and turned that land into endowments for fledgling universities (...) The grants came from more than 160 violence-backed land cessions made by close to 250 tribal nations." (Ahton & Lee, 2020). For an analysis of slavery and academic finance, see Craig Steven Wilder's *Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America's Universities* and the recent anthology *Slavery and the University: Histories and Legacies*, edited by Leslie M. Harris, James T. Campbell, and Alfred L. Brophy.

error without association without reference to those who are not zooming and have fallen or are so soon to fall.

Could it be possible that what had been disrupted by my voice required disruption? Those odd shimmering words that ricocheted inside that non-existing room, passionate words that no one caught, no one held — did they not possess some reckoning, a fragile but forceful truth? Can I reach you, can I teach you, not despite but because of what in me is broken?⁷

Later in the day I would visualize the troubled scholars together, my colleagues without me, in the room we once occupied — they were speaking with the director about the postdoctoral scholar who was obviously not well. But this scene occurs only in my imagination, for there was no space for them to gather, no door to close, only a series of images and texts, everything abstract but the effect of what they would claim is care.

Crisis comes from the Greek *Krisis*, decision, *krinein*, decide. I was identified as the crisis, through a series of decisions that were not mine.

My colleagues contacted the director who contacted the administrative staff who contacted my emergency contact who contacted my parents. What would speak to this looming moment of reasonable collective betrayal, in a season of losing, in the name of care, when I apparently could not be trusted to mouth an understandable word? How to establish consent when I could not be approached to make a choice, when I would not be asked about the movement to relay news to someone who can make sense on my behalf? Where was the direction of the plan I wrote in the summer of 2019, when I could never have predicted the spring of 2020? This text could be consulted when my own continuing ability to speak apparently could not. This text and its simple suggestions — a walk, a talk — could have nudged my colleagues away from their circuitry of fear. But really, they decided, as they took their virtual steps so hurried to this plan and then past this plan: all that was needed was the name of the emergency contact — someone else, sane proxy for the woman who was now assuredly mad.

And emergency: can we stop at this door? What in this instance constituted an emergency, and for whom? This apparent novelty of emergence, event, beginning — how had I emerged and where? Can I claim nothing new took place, only that these colleagues had caught a glimpse of a way of being? Or am I capable of claiming anything at all?

For those who decided, no link stretched from any of my texts to my face. No preparation in the form of my academic essays or my months of collegial discussion or even my emergency plan could abate the danger of madness, the risk of speaking to the one who possessed it. No connection reached from this uncertain living moment — my uncomfortable announcements in a research seminar that my colleagues apparently had so much trouble to grasp — back to my published article on what it means to function even momentarily as a mad person's neighbour. No gesture pointed toward my published article on consent, on speaking and listening to the mad person even or especially through what you deem to be her crisis. No pause considered what I had dared to outline were the visceral ongoing effects of not being a voice worthy of human witness. My essays that my colleagues had so elegantly and generously engaged, evidencing sophistication in analyzing each rhetorical move, did not in fact translate to this vulnerable happening. The essays remained abstract: reasoned and challenging arguments to be underlined. The threat madness brought to the Zoom room was real. Those were articles. Here I was, in existence. The madwoman on the page: intellectual puzzle. The madwoman in the flesh: visceral risk. What my explicitly autobiographical references to madness accomplished was not in fact

7. In *History Beyond Trauma* (2004), psychoanalysts Françoise Davoine and Jean-Max Gaudillière write of psychosis not as symptom but as a *place*, as if it were itself a room in which to hold the losses that historical atrocities have abandoned to a foreclosed present.

to widen the possibilities of what could be heard — to increase people’s receptivity to linguistic unordinariness, to challenge common sensibilities of what constitutes insight, even to slow and soothe another’s response to words that don’t immediately and comfortably signify, to creak open the sometimes anxious chance of staying with the very rhythm of meaning as it slides, to encourage listening to mad speech the way we find ourselves whispering the lines of a poem, recognizing the echo of a song, their inner mysteries and startling connections to our own. My intellectual entreaties accomplished none of this, certainly not when such daring and compassionate clarity was most needed, beyond the page. Instead, once the threshold of madness had been identified as mine, then the range, the bandwidth, of my particular verbal expressions — the possible understanding of my contribution — had been preemptively narrowed.

An anonymous team of my university colleagues, together with the director and the administrative staff — people I had welcomed into my home, cohort who had accompanied me through an academic year, scholars who had spent hours reading my invitations to conceive madness as something uniquely to hear — did not first risk an honest conversation with the person who apparently inspired their concern. Before reaching my emergency proxy, they did not ask for any advice from the one standing in their realm who is both the focal point of crisis and a researcher on psychosis: how it communicates and how those who experience it can voice their own needs for care. Instead, they turned immediately to the emergency contact — that name to be reached only when someone is *unable to communicate on her own*. She would possess the authority I now lacked. Any decision, they decided, would be the contact’s, the one who would know what to do in their emergency.

The madwoman invited to this campus to teach others cannot do so.⁸

My question of that day remains so simple. Could these faculty colleagues and administrators who feared for my mental or physical security not have called me first — before speaking on my behalf, before asking for another to do so? Talked with me first? Asked me about my contribution, my wellbeing, my practices of care, what else I might need, and then wait for the answer? From the walled safety of their homes? I am here, in my apartment. My number is available. My phone is charged. I can speak to you without the physical proximity that could invoke your fear of getting hurt. Or would psychosis somehow leap along the line?

Not everyone went along with the plan — or even knew its direction. I’d learn later that for their own reasons a couple of scholars had stayed away from the seminar that day — all of the faces were not in the digital room — and that one younger scholar had raised her Zoom hand but had never been asked to speak. Another colleague e-mailed to thank me for my reference to strategies in his work, and in this time of international pandemic we exchanged suggestions for restorative reading and listening: theory, literature, music. These people did initiate and maintain contact with me, in the usual ways, and we managed to communicate through a zig zag intimacy, sometimes raging, sometimes laughing: we continue to talk still.

But this sustaining dialogue — which suggests speaking to the madwoman was and is indeed possible — does not negate the immediate collective movement toward a breach of con-

8. For an expansive analysis of madness within university settings, consult *Mad at School: Rhetorics of Mental Disability and Academic Life* (2011), by Margaret Price. For an autobiographical account of treatment by institutions both academic and medical: Elyn Saks’ *The Centre Does Not Hold: My Journey Through Madness* (2007) and Esmé Weijun Wang’s *The Collected Schizophrenias* (2019). Richard Ingram examines Mad studies as an in/discipline in “Doing Mad Studies: Making (Non)Sense Together”, *Intersectionalities* (2016). Two works that narrate a faculty’s own experiences of madness — and listening to madness — and the racist and sanist treatment by university colleagues that led to departure from an academic institution include Keguro Macharia’s “On Quitting,” *The New Inquiry* (2018), and Sejal Shah’s “Even if You Can’t See It: Invisible Disability and Neurodiversity,” *The Kenyon Review Online* (2019).

sent that existed as administrative action and structure. My other colleagues deemed it urgently necessary, in the second week of COVID, to determine whether or not I *was a risk to self or other*, this language that had never been mine and was not theirs — blueprint from a medical pamphlet or a TV legal drama — though my colleagues were now exchanging back-and-forth its authoritative and potentially carceral agency, these scholars with no clinical expertise, no practice at community intervention or therapeutic counsel, yet no apparent humility about their knowledge and any limits to its powers. With the authority of this particular vocabulary, they could contact the police, those with the guns and handcuffs who ally with academics when they need the mentally ill escorted from land the university claims as its own. This possibility, used or unused, was now at their fingertips. For they had localized the crisis, in the spring of 2020; they had found the risk. It was the madwoman in their midst.

What happened with their words if they did not attach themselves to my state? What body did their crisis find?

Without my permission they reached the emergency contact who, again without my permission, reached my mother. This relay of madness had lost its connection to me. Then three days after being told that her daughter was exhibiting symptoms of psychosis — for that diagnostic label can never leave a scholar's orbit once she has risked uttering it in relation to her own mind — this daughter in a foreign country, across a closed border, in a global pandemic, this daughter who now seems so upset at her colleagues, why is she so upset, calm down daughter, calm down, this daughter who is not sleeping and who lives so far from this mother who is not sleeping — this mother is my mother and she has slipped away from my attempts at protection. *I had a serious fall*, my mother called to tell me, not wanting to tell me. She had to be taken to the hospital in an ambulance. She initially refused to go with the paramedics because she knew what could lurk inside emergency rooms ostensibly sterile. She has needed twice daily care ever since, home visits that can expose her to the virus.

Can I prove that my colleagues' language — each sentence of crisis relayed to the emergency contact and then to my family — pushed my mother to the ground? Do words touch flesh? Does *risk to other* make such funhouse leaps, from the sane to the mad to the sane, across time and space and border? Can I claim that the Zoom room discussion and the texts to the director and the messages between colleagues and then between the one chosen to warn the emergency contact — all these data exchanges that were so confident in their care but were really nothing more than a series of black marks and electric pulses — that these caused physical harm? That the words of risk did not match me yet did find their referent by creating their referent? Would it now be madness to make this sense?

Or can I prove that the inside of my mind never did correspond with what my colleagues thought they identified? Can I step free of their help, the signifying power of their crisis that made decisions on my behalf? Can I assert that I was walking through those first weeks of the COVID pandemic with my pain and rage and dread — in dialogue with others, both beloved friends and well-trained professionals — and that this cluster of responses was itself a form of meaning, a potential testimony, a way to speak, a way to live? Can I say that their assurance in the referential power of their words negated in that moment the very possibility of my voice and that this negation was itself a danger? Can I say that I belonged, that my disruption — yes my very disruption, my contribution as unhinged as a room without a door — had its place?

When I eventually spoke my concerns to an official advisor, she asked me whether I wanted to file a disability discrimination complaint. A *6.4* it is called, this precise number like a criminal file, numerical distance when no word could quite contain what my statement might unleash. *Your consent was violated*, she stated so sure. *The emergency contact was used before an attempt*

to consult with you.⁹ But what university would lose a trial against a woman who has openly stated she experiences psychosis? What colleague is not in the right, in the secure corner of the good, when choosing to bypass the quite obvious risky uncertainty of a madwoman's truth? How does one add the arithmetic then? Who would win in the law's room?

Each meeting about this potential discrimination case and its gentler restorative alternatives has taken place on Zoom — the blue link in my e-mail inbox, the reminder of the forthcoming appointment, the entry into that sudden appearance of eyes and nose and mouth, clock ticking in the corner of the screen — but I have grown accomplished with this form of communication, its intimacy that precludes intimacy, just as I have grown more solid in this season of the killing virus and the political atrocity that keeps pointing to biology as the cause of death. I have become quiet. I attended each remaining meeting with my colleagues, but I chose not to run my video. And I chose to mute my voice. *Don't do that*, my mother warned me, *they will think you are crazy. They will call the police.* Each week I erected this small strike of one, my attempt to show symbolically that in their realm — the university domain that extended even to this Zoom room in my apartment, our scarves over t-shirts, blazers over yoga pants, grey roots sprouting, toddler yanking, cat meowing, even in this strange attenuation of scholarly rapport — the madwoman, as they decided, could not be seen and could not be heard. Zoom room is no pink attic. They are all there, most are, even if you can't see them, the twenty-something faces. My expression is not present in this privileged circuitry of electric squares. Children can cry, dogs can bark, but the madwoman, she is what needs to be excluded. As for their response to my muteness, my mother had little to fear. In six weeks of silent revolt — just the sturdiness of my first and last name like the digital mark of some robotic author who signs sanitary and sleek in white letters across a little black box, my face missing, my voice voicing no more — the Zoom room continued as it was meant to continue. And no one asked what it was I could not say.

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9. "Consent" was one key term exchanged in this conversation, but the disability advocate and I also spoke of what I called "disability profiling." I will be part of a university-wide initiative to write guidance on use of the emergency contact, for which I found there is no policy and no training, formal or informal, a concern when it comes to responses to colleagues with physical or mental disabilities and the assumptions around their capacity.

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