4

Mad Black Rants

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Part One: Confined

"He's balmy!" a white man said. "Make 'em take 'im outta your cell. He'll kill you. He went off his nut from studying too much at the university. He was writing a book on how colored people live and he says somebody stole all the facts he'd found. He says he's got to the bottom of why colored folks are treated bad and he's going to tell the president and have things changed, see? He's *nuts*!"
—Wright [1940] 1993, 343

Confined to a cell in Cook County Jail, Bigger Thomas awaits his doom. The beleaguered black protagonist of Richard Wright's 1940 protest novel, *Native Son*, Bigger is held behind iron bars.[1] Deeper still, he dwells behind an existential wall he has erected around himself, "a barrier of protection between him and the world he feared" (Wright [1940] 1993, 343), a petrified hardness to keep out "racial hurt" (King 2008, 39).[2] Nineteen years into a life rife with that hurt, and amid the bleak backdrop of Depression-era Chicago, Bigger accidentally kills a wealthy white heiress named Mary Dalton. While on the run, in a fit of spite and desperation, he rapes and intentionally kills Bessie Mears, a woe-weary black woman who is sometimes his girlfriend. Bigger is soon exposed, declared public enemy, deluged with public hatred, violently apprehended, convicted of Mary's (not Bessie's) rape and murder, and quickly condemned to death.[3]

Bigger's jailhouse malaise is interrupted by the arrival of the "balmy" figure described in the epigraph: a mad black scholar writing a book. Hurled into the cell, the balmy man breaches Bigger's existential wall so that Bigger's "hate and shame vanished in the face of his dread of this insane man turning suddenly upon him" (Wright [1940] 1993, 343). Considering all the brutality Bigger has endured, all the harm he has inflicted, all the peril he faces from guards and inmates inside that jail, all the animus from mobs outside, it is remarkable that he is so utterly unsettled by a solitary black man seeking social transformation. Maybe Bigger agrees with that white inmate shouting warnings nearby. According to that white man, the urge to battle antiblackness and the will to seek racial justice bespeak a nutty mind: "He says he's got to the bottom of why colored folks

are treated bad and he's going to tell the president and have things changed, see? He's *nuts*!"

Meanwhile, the balmy man screams truth to power and literally rattles the cage. Bigger beholds that "the man's eyes were blood-red; the corners of his lips were white with foam. Sweat glistened on his brown face. He clutched the bars with such frenzy that when he yelled his entire body vibrated. He seemed so agonized" (Wright [1940] 1993, 342). The balmy man's madness entails an unruliness of bodily surges and eruptions: blood rushing into his eyes, foam bubbling from his mouth, sweat seeping from his face, shouts flying out his throat, convulsions coursing through his body, agony emanating from his flesh. Remarkably, though, his madness is as thoughtful as it is visceral, as politicized as it is agonized. When the mad scholar finally speaks for himself, he claims he has uncovered a vast antiblack conspiracy:

> "You're afraid of me!" the man shouted. "That's why you put me in here! But I'll tell the President anyhow! I'll tell 'im you make us live in such crowded conditions on the South Side that one out of every ten of us is insane! I'll tell 'im that you dump all the stale foods into the Black Belt and sell them for more than you can get anywhere else! I'll tell 'im you tax us, but you won't build hospitals! I'll tell 'im the schools are so crowded that they breed perverts! I'll tell 'im you hire us last and fire us first! I'll tell the President and the League of Nations." (344)

While others may dismiss these words as rant and rave, I regard them as a condensed research report—orated in a brilliant flourish of rant and rave, just the same. The balmy man's findings are the fruit of interdisciplinary investigation into (infra)structural antiblackness in Chicago. He describes a collusion that spans housing, medicine, education, foodways, taxation, and employment, all systematically degrading black life. Based on his own declarations and the admonitions from that white inmate, it would seem that the balmy man's crimes are as follows: amassing damning evidence against city government, alerting others to his findings, expressing his fury aloud in public, planning to petition the president and League of Nations, and mobilizing to battle the evil he's exposed. These acts are treasonous transgressions against antiblackness and white supremacy.

If that white inmate knows so much about the balmy scholar, let's suppose he knows the allegations against Bigger—including the false charges that Bigger raped a white woman. Since fantasies of black rapists enthralled white supremacist imagination in early and mid-twentieth-century America, one might expect the white inmate to treat Bigger with special enmity. Yet in this scene the inmate shows no sign of malice toward Bigger. Instead, he regards Bigger as a sympathetic figure whose safety is in jeopardy, who ought to be warned. Why this sympathy for an alleged rapist and antipathy toward a scholar-activist?

I venture this answer: To the logics of white supremacy and antiblackness, Bigger's actual and alleged crimes are less menacing than the balmy man's revelations. White supremacists and antiblack racists may loathe Bigger, but their loathing is likely mixed with a smug sense of rectitude. After all, Bigger would seem to affirm their fantasies of black male brutality and thus justify their regimes of segregation, pathologization, criminalization, and annihilation. The mad black scholar-activist, on the other hand, belies their fantasies of black depravity and inferiority. He announces that black people are not constitutionally depraved or inferior but rather are subjected to depraved machinations and inferior conditions wrought by antiblackness.[4] Furthermore, as antilynching heroine Ida B. Wells had insisted decades earlier, there is no factual basis for white supremacist fear of black bogeymen ravishing white damsels in droves (Wells [1900] 2010). There is, however, ample cause for white supremacists to dread black radical planning and struggle. The balmy black man is so terrifying because he conducts such planning and struggle. Alas, he has no time to detail his findings or elaborate his agenda: "Soon a group of men dressed in white came running in with a stretcher. They unlocked the cell and grabbed the yelling man, laced him in a straitjacket, flung him into a stretcher and carted him away" (Wright [1940] 1993, 344).

During his brief appearance in *Native Son*, the balmy black scholar manifests four modes of madness: *phenomenal madness*, *furious madness*, *psychosocial madness*, and *medicalized madness*. I have theorized this four-part schema at great length elsewhere (Bruce 2021);[5] for now, I will sketch how each applies to the balmy man. His madness is phenomenal madness: an intense unruliness of mind experienced in the consciousness of a madperson (here accompanied by an unruliness of bodily surges and eruptions). It is furious madness: an acute and aggressive displeasure (here provoked by the systematic degradation of black people). It is psychosocial madness: a radical rupture from a given psychonormative status quo (here, in particular, it is a black insurrection against the pernicious logic of antiblackness). Furthermore, those white-clad orderlies will carry the balmy man into psychiatric confinement. There he will likely be branded with medicalized madness: severe mental illness, as codified and diagnosed by psychiatry.

In total, the madman's presence persists for about two pages. Nevermore does he appear in the book, nor is he ever mentioned again. And yet, for all his textual transience, he leaves a monumental impression in my imagination. Mad, black, reviled, exiled, deviant, defiant, critical, ethical, radical, writhing under the threat of annihilation, and quickly receding from view, he deserves all the care and rigor that *mad methodology* brings to bear.

Mad methodology, as I propose and practice it, is an ensemble of epistemologies, political praxes, interpretive techniques, existential orientations, affective dispositions, and life strategies that activate madness and center mad subjectivity.

In this paradigm, madness informs and infuses critical, ethical, radical ways of thinking, ways of telling, ways of protesting, ways of interpreting, ways of feeling, and ways of life. Mad methodology seeks, follows, and rides the unruly movements of madness. It reads and hears and amplifies *idioms of madness*: those purported rants, raves, rambles, outbursts, mumbles, stammers, slurs, gibberish sounds, nonsense noises, and unseemly silences that defy and deform the grammars of hegemonic Reason.[6] It historicizes and contextualizes madness as a social construction and social relation vis-à-vis Reason. It ponders the sporadic violence of madness in tandem and in tension with the structural violence of Reason. It cultivates critical ambivalence—a willingness to forgo affective resolution, cognitive closure, or ideological certitude and to harness the energetic tension and friction in ambivalent feeling—all the better to reckon with the simultaneous harm and benefit that may accompany madness (Bruce 2019).[7] It recognizes and sometimes harnesses "mad" feelings like obsession, rage, and paranoia as stimulus for radical thought and practice.

While normative Reason discredits madpersons, mad methodology affirms that they can be critical theorists and decisive protagonists in struggles for liberation. To be clear, I am not suggesting that madpersons are always already agents of liberation. I am simply and assuredly acknowledging that they can be, which is a heretical admission amid antimad worlds. I propose a mad methodology that neither vilifies the madperson as evil incarnate, nor romanticizes the madperson as resistance personified, nor patronizes the madperson as helpless ward awaiting aid. Rather, mad methodology respects the complexity and variability of mad subjects.

Most urgently, mad methodology extends *radical compassion* to the purported madpersons, queers, ghosts, freaks, weirdos, imaginary friends, disembodied voices, unvoiced bodies, and unReasonable others who trespass—like stowaways and fugitives and insurgents—in Reasonable modernity. Radical compassion is a will to care for, a commitment to feel with, a striving to learn from, a readiness to work alongside, and an openness to be vulnerable before a precarious other, though they may be drastically dissimilar to yourself. Radical compassion is not a naïve appeal to an idyllic oneness where difference is blithely effaced. Nor is it a smug projection of oneself into the position of another, consequently displacing that other.[8] Nor is it an invitation to walk a mile in someone else's shoes and amble, like a tourist, through their lifeworld, leaving them existentially barefoot all the while. Rather, radical compassion is an exhortation to ethically walk and sit and study and fight and build and suffer and celebrate with another whose condition may be utterly unlike your own. Radical compassion strives to impart care, exchange feeling, transmit awareness, embolden vulnerability, and fortify solidarity across circumstantial, sociocultural, phenomenological, and ontological chasms. It seeks to forge an existential entanglement not easily loosened. It persists even and especially toward beings who are the objects of contempt and

condemnation from dominant value systems. For those who experience profound self-alienation—who are existentially estranged from their own selves, who endure internal rupture and fragmentation—it is vital to extend radical compassion to one's own self. I hasten to mention that radical compassion is no panacea: as intently as it strives, it sometimes falls short. After all, it is subject to the limits of human understanding, imagination, and will. Moreover, some chasms are too wide to cross. These limitations should not be cause for resignation or despair. We sometimes fail, but we keep trying.

A parapositivist approach, mad methodology does not attempt to wholly, transparently reveal madness. How could it? Madness, after all, tends to frustrate interpretation, elude understanding, refuse resolution. To study madness is to become accustomed to uncertainty and irresolution. To study madness is to discover that one can ethically encounter and engage a thing without purporting to know it. As mad methodologist, I relinquish the imperative to know, to take, to capture, to possess, to master—to lay bare all the world with its countless terrors and wonders—that drives much scholarly inquiry.

Now we return to that dreadful scene in Cook County Jail. As mad methodologist, I linger with Wright's black captive–cum–mad prisoner: his data stolen, his work dismissed, his arms strapped into a straitjacket, his body hurled onto a stretcher, then laid supine, then wheeled away into a paratextual elsewhere. I dream a subjunctive scenario where this mad black scholar regains his freedom. I imagine him finding his stolen data, then finishing his manuscript, then publishing it to great fanfare and controversy, then delivering it to the president and the League of Nations, then appealing to justice and liberation movements with greater moral authority, then organizing mad and black masses, and eventually achieving something like revolution or relief. I picture his book on a shelf of volumes about black Chicago in the mid-twentieth century, nestled between St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton's 1945 ethnography, *Black Metropolis*, and Gwendolyn Brooks's 1945 poetry collection, *A Street in Bronzeville*. In this subjunctive world, the book is bound and the man is free.

I want freedom for him and for the mad and black prisoners held in real-life Cook County Jail today. In 2015, an estimated one-third of the jail's one hundred thousand inmates were living with some form of mental illness. This means that Cook County Jail was effectively the largest psychiatric "facility" in the United States. For a jail to lead the nation in housing mentally ill persons is a devastating testament to the failure of the US public health infrastructure to grapple with mental illness. Also in 2015, 67 percent of the jail's inmates were black, though only 25 percent of Cook County's residents were black, a devastating testament to the racialization of America's carceral state (Ford 2015).

As mad methodologist, it is my business to abide with the balmy man and his real-life counterparts; to discern the wisdom of his mad black rants; to highlight the insight in his "nutty" outburst; to amplify his rebuke of state-sanctioned

antiblackness; and to extend radical compassion to him and to others who endure such struggle. Beneath and beyond my radical compassion, I also feel something like *ordinary affinity* for him. If radical compassion is driven by political imagination and resolve, ordinary affinity is far more rudimentary; it is solidarity born of likeness and shared experience. I feel this kinship because I am a mad black scholar, too.

In fact, I am a mad methodologist in at least two senses. First, I am a scholar who theorizes and mobilizes mad methodology. Second, I am a madman devising methods for critical, radical, ethical living. I know, firsthand, the ordeal of being a mad black scholar while writing a mad black book while braving an antimad-antiblack world.[9]

Incidentally, *balmy* means both "insane" and "soothing."

Part Two: Open

My own madness is a conspiracy of cruel ironies that won't let me rest: a need for cleanliness that erupts into mess; an urge for order that careens to disorder; a tendency toward doubt that will undoubtedly surface; a tyrannical self-rule that is utterly unruly; intrusive thoughts that are as much indigenous as they are invaders to my mind; ghastly obsessions that are as repulsive as they are transfixing; an ineffable feeling that demands constant explanation; a past-glutted regret that wants to devour my future; a drive toward perfection that fucks things up. And then there are the ritual practices: the rinses, revisions, rehearsals, recountings, countings, meditations, medications, inspections, prayers, atonements, and confessions militated against that anguish but only ever providing provisional relief. Eventually, the sheer dirtiness, the strangeness, the bloodiness, the meanness, the nastiness of this world comes rushing or creeping in.

If there is a spectrum of stigma about mental illness in US popular imagination, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) is typically treated as a lesser mental illness, a milder madness. It does not incite the terror that swarms around schizophrenia and dissociative identity disorder (often confused and conflated in popular representations). Nor does it inspire the pathos that seems to solemnly gather around major depressive disorder. Instead, OCD is cast as mere idiosyncrasy: an irksome tendency to nitpick and split hairs, or, more favorably, an admirable perfectionism. This spectrum of stigma is vividly displayed in popular cinema, where caricatures of mental illness abound. Schizophrenia and dissociative identity disorder are frequent fixations of horror films, where schizophrenic and dissociative "psychos" spawn mayhem and murder. Depression is depicted in melodramatic and sentimental movies, often the consequence of heterosexual heartbreak and healed by romantic redemption and cheerful friends. Meanwhile, OCD is frequent fodder for comedy, where symptoms become foibles and compulsive rituals resemble comic routines.[10] OCD incurs less social stigma than do

schizophrenia and depression—but this knowledge yields little relief when I am scrubbing my skin down to the soul.

My first book, *How to Go Mad without Losing Your Mind: Madness and Black Radical Creativity* (Bruce 2021), ponders the role of madness in black radical art-making, self-making, and world-making. Not merely a study of madness, *How to Go Mad* is symptom and fruit of its author's madness. In other words, the book both suffers and benefits from my own balminess. The suffering comes from my dogged dread that the book will fail. When I read my prose in print, I see—with a marvelous singularity of vision that could be mistaken for divination or hallucination—errors and omissions that prod me toward unruliness of mind. I do not believe that I will ever finish that book, no matter that it is published. I will never feel that it has achieved closure or completion. It is endless. No copy-edit, no print run, no smell of fresh pages under elegant cover, no esteemed award, no slot on a bookshelf, no pages spread wide on an eager lap will ever convince me that the book is done. There's this aching feeling that some essential example or insight is missing; that a remark unwittingly degrades a community or misrepresents a lifeworld; that a misplaced quotation mark or lost footnote will unhinge the integrity of the work; that some flamboyant typo will show up, uninvited, to an utterly important sentence, enthralling your attention while the embarrassed sentence bows and disappears.

But what of the benefit? Madness suffuses the ethical, critical, and radical impetus for *How to Go Mad* and my broader practice of mad study. What I mean is that the work is devoutly ethical, trained by a superego that demands and relishes (before it questions and discounts) good deeds. The work is painstakingly critical, sharing my propensity to question everything, to take nothing for granted, to seek the secrets buried underneath every placid surface, to find fault everywhere, to try to make it better. The work is intensely radical, inheriting my inclination to think and dream at the limits, beyond the limits, and further still, but never *still*, because my mind keeps darting, keeps pacing. OCD might intensify another elemental force coursing through that book, its most vital feature of all, its care. At the palpitating heart of *How to Go Mad* is care: both careful and caring, both exacting and loving.

I considered composing a book manuscript in the format of my madness. Such a book would sometimes forgo grammar and sometimes adhere fanatically to it. It would veer between immaculate eloquence and impenetrable ramblings. It would occasionally dispense with the left-to-right, top-to-bottom, front-to-back trajectory typical among English-language books, moving in zigzags, spirals, and wormholes instead. It might include blank pages, murals' worth of marginalia, obsessive lists to rival telephone books, volumes of parenthetical digressions, miles of strikethroughs, drafts of paragraphs juxtaposed with their revisions, sprawling gaps and blackouts interrupting the narrative—all deprioritizing decipherability in order to achieve phenomenological fidelity. Or maybe

my madness demands precisely what I poured into that mad black book: chaos condensed into one hundred thousand words of mostly coherent, sometimes resplendent sentences. Sentences born of profound violence and care. Sentences that want desperately to be held in your mouth and memory. Mad black rants rendered artfully.

I sometimes wonder whether I accidentally actualize Frantz Fanon's prayer at the end of *Black Skin, White Masks*: "Oh, my body! Make me always a man who questions" (1986, 206). If I am a man, I am a man who always questions, who is driven to ask with a visceral urgency as irresistible and insatiable as an itch in a fold of my brain. Every belief, every word, every phrase, every observation, every proposition, every citation, every punctuation mark is subjected to ruthless doubt and vicious interrogation. The conventions of grammar oblige me to end most of these sentences with periods, but there are ghostly invisible lines curling and hovering over most of these tiny dots. What I mean is that most of these periods are interrogation marks in disguise; most of these declarations are really restless questions underneath.

This restlessness thwarts tranquility—but thankfully, it also refuses complacency. This restlessness is an eternal doubting—and also, fortunately, a tireless probing. My refusal of respite resembles what dancer-choreographer and movement theorist Martha Graham describes as the artist's "queer divine dissatisfaction, a blessed unrest that keeps us marching" (de Mille 1991, 264). I sometimes slow my march, though I will not stop. This is a procession without end, without rest, without satisfaction, without closure. It is always underway, always awake, always longing, always open.

NOTES

This essay is adapted from the introduction and afterword *of How to Go Mad without Losing Your Mind: Madness and Black Radical Creativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021).

1 In this essay, I do not capitalize "black" as a racial signifier. My intention is to center a "lowercase blackness" and "improper blackness" that resists reification as a proper noun. For further insight on my grammatical ethos, see *How to Go Mad without Losing Your Mind*, 6.

2 In *African Americans and the Culture of Pain*, Debra Walker King theorizes "racial hurt" as racialized violence that poses an existential threat to its victim. She writes, "Pain is a personal experience, a feeling that is uniquely our own. . . . Racial hurt, however, is not something we own. Racial hurt owns us. It, not pain, attacks the soul and renders its victims wounded or worse—soul murdered" (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008) 39.

3 Bessie's remains are carted out as evidence in the trial for Mary's murder, but no trial is convened to pursue justice for Bessie's murder. Alas, Bessie is a poor black woman whose death and life are treated as inconsequential and contemptible—not meriting a trial or redress—by an antiblack legal system.

4 This "balmy" man would find powerful alibi in St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton's monumental 1945 study, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993). Based on research conducted in 1930s Chicago, *Black Metropolis* exposes a city structured by de facto segregation and infrastructural antiblackness.

For a study examining the racial inequity in contemporary Chicago, see Natalie Moore, *The South Side: A Portrait of Chicago and American Segregation* (New York: St. Martin's, 2017).

5 For a detailed account of these four modes of madness, see *How to Go Mad without Losing Your Mind*, 6–9.

6 I have defined "Reason" elsewhere as follows: "Reason is a proper noun denoting a positivist, secularist, Enlightenment-rooted episteme purported to uphold objective 'truth' while mapping and mastering the world. In normative Western philosophy since the Age of Enlightenment, Reason and rationality are believed essential for achieving modern personhood, joining civil society, and participating in liberal politics . . . However, Reason has been entangled, from those very Enlightenment roots, with misogynist, colonialist, ableist, antiblack, and other pernicious ideologies." (Bruce 2021, 4).

7 Regarding "critical ambivalence," I have written elsewhere that "Sometimes it is useful, even crucial, to tarry in the openness of ambiguity; in the strategic vantage point available in the interstice (the better to look both ways and beyond); in the capacious bothness of ambivalence; in the sheer potential in irresolution . . . Lingering in ambivalence, we can access multiple, even dissonant, vantages at once, before pivoting, if we finally choose to pivot, toward decisive motion. To be clear, I am not describing an impotent ambivalence that relinquishes or thwarts politics. Rather, I am proposing an instrumental ambivalence that harnesses the energetic motion and friction and tension of ambivalent feeling. Such energy might propel progressive and radical movement." La Marr Jurelle Bruce, "Shore, Unsure: Loitering as a Way of Life," *GLQ* 5, no. 2 (2019): 357.

8 In *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, Saidiya Hartman unpacks the epistemic violence wrought by hegemonic "empathy." She writes: "Properly speaking, empathy is a projection of oneself into another in order to better understand the other" or 'the projection of one's own personality into an object, with the attribution to the object of one's own emotions.'" Hartman further writes that "by exploiting the vulnerability of the captive body as a vessel for the uses, thoughts, and feelings of others, the humanity extended to the slave inadvertently confirms the expectations and desires definitive of the relations of chattel slavery . . . empathy is double-edged, for in making the other's suffering one's own, this suffering is occluded by the other's obliteration." Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 18–19.

9 That book is *How to Go Mad without Losing Your Mind*. In this disclosure of "madness," I am especially influenced by and indebted to disclosures of "madness" (whether medicalized or not) in Patricia J. Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights: Diary of a Law Professor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991); Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012); PhebeAnn Marjory Wolframe, "The Madwoman in the Academy, or, Revealing the Invisible Straightjacket: Theorizing and Teaching Saneism and Sane Privilege," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 33, no. 1 (2013), https://dsq-sds.org/article/view/3425/3200; and Keguro Macharia, "On Quitting," *The New Inquiry,* Sept. 19, 2018, https://thenewinquiry.com/on-quitting. I am also emboldened by Margaret Price's book-length study of "madness" in academic discourses and spaces, *Mad at School Rhetorics of Mental Disability and Academic Life* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011).

10 Jack Nicholson won the 1998 Academy Award for Best Actor for playing a comically insufferable obsessive-compulsive author in the romantic comedy *As Good as It Gets*. Nicolas Cage earned great acclaim for playing an obsessive compulsive con man in the 2003 heist comedy, *Matchstick Men*. In television, Tony Shalhoub won three Primetime Emmys for Lead Actor in a Comedy Series for his portrayal of an obsessive-compulsive detective in the comedic crime procedural, *Monk*, which ran from 2002 to 2009.

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