

Gender and Cultural Studies in Africa and the Diaspora



EDITED BY CAROLINE A. BROWN AND JOHANNA X. K. GARVEY

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# MADNESS IN BLACK WOMEN'S DIASPORIC FICTIONS

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AESTHETICS OF RESISTANCE



Gender and Cultural Studies in Africa  
and the Diaspora

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Caroline A. Brown · Johanna X.K. Garvey  
Editors

# Madness in Black Women's Diasporic Fictions

Aesthetics of Resistance

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Gender and Cultural Studies in Africa and the Diaspora

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Caroline A. Brown

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Johanna X.K. Garvey

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# Introduction: Women, Writing, Madness: Reframing Diaspora Aesthetics

*Caroline A. Brown*

...For Blacks of the diaspora, the tension between memory and the loss of memory has been a defining feature. Forced migration from Africa to the Americas and the persistent negation of Black humanity ensured that the ghosts of the past would haunt the present. Blacks have constantly sought both to hold on to and to retrieve faded memories of the past, to grasp a sense of an at-times illusory Africa and to seize genuine moments of resistance and revolt against White domination. Black and diasporic memory is about revolt. But can we genuinely speak of authentic Black or diasporic memory, a coherent experience drawn from disparate histories?  
—David Austin, *Fear of a Black Nation* (28)

All I could see were her hands and arms. They were a dark brown, her palms stained a deep orange. Otherwise, she was wrapped in what looked like rags. Mummified within a shroud of dirty cloth—a nightgown, sheets and blankets, some towels—she would sit silently, passively, on one street corner or another of the urban, residential Los Angeles neighborhood where I was living during my sabbatical year. As I walked my dog in the morning, afternoon, early evening, I would intermittently spot her. For several weeks during the autumn of 2012, as cars whizzed by and I passed a few stray pedestrians, I would identify her by

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the mounds of cloth covering her body, the scattered possessions in small piles around her, the torn cardboard boxes she sat on. I was not unused to seeing homeless people, the majority of whom were black men. But when I looked at them, whatever their individual affect, they were clearly engaged with the world around them: setting up a lone encampment for shelter and an evening's rest, or more likely dismantling it; pulling wheeled suitcases, toting knapsacks, or pushing shopping carts; requesting spare change and then walking into the supermarket or returning to panhandle on a busy sidewalk. They were often on the move, unmistakably negotiating their environment. Even speaking frantically to no one in particular or screaming at invisible tormentors, there was a coherence about their interaction with the environment. When my gaze fell on her, it was different. She would appear suddenly, as if from nowhere. She was so still apart from her head bobbing, her face obscured by the cloth in which she was swaddled. With so little of her identity on view, her body became a blank, a negation of itself: she was almost spectral, ghostly.

But equally telling for me was my own response. I felt a deep dread. If possible, I would turn and walk down another street. One cause for my unease was her absolute vulnerability due to, what I assumed, her status as a woman alone and unprotected. Her proximity to physical danger and the elements themselves: sun, dirt, rain, waste, wind, heat, pestilence, disease. But as significantly, I felt a concern when I gazed at her, a worry and anxiety. How had she come to sit on that corner? Who was she? What was her name? What had caused her abjection? But I also felt a shame: the desire to not look, to turn away, to forget. And perhaps as significantly I was affected by my comprehension that I would make no effort to get to know her or alter her circumstances despite our shared racial and gender status as black women. I was aware of the profound psychosocial chasm symbolized in our respective relationships with those streets. I assumed she was mentally ill and was myself terrified of stepping, slipping into the web of her madness. As an associate professor on a paid sabbatical leave, I was enmeshed in a world of privilege few can comprehend and that was impossible for me to deny. Yet as a black woman from a working-class, immigrant family, the world of work—of classroom, departmental meetings, scholarly research, conferences—and social life often felt alien and antagonistic, both in the United States—where I was born, raised, educated, and began my career—and in Canada, where I am currently employed. It is not simply a matter of being in a place or inhabiting a role, it was an existential issue, a question of fit, of belonging. And that could prove a more elusive goal. In the period between the civil unrest

of Occupy Wall Street and what would become the Black Lives Matter movement, I sensed a tension in the air, a deep divide between the promise of America and the reality of the socioeconomic dispossession experienced by an ever-increasing percentage of Americans. While this precarity was traditionally the lot of black people and other minority groups, it was now affecting not only the white working class but increasingly the middle classes of all stripes. When I beheld this anonymous woman, I felt my alienation as an almost cosmic force—both as drift and suffocation. As significant, however, was the fact that I had just begun working on an earlier version of *Mad Epiphanies*, a book about mental illness—or its uses—in the fictions of diasporic black women novelists. Looking at this woman both underscored the reality of and threatened to collapse the divide between the world of the page, conference, and classroom, and the world of such radical dispossession. It thus accentuated the contradictions, even the hypocrisy, of researching and writing about mental illness when the object of this study, so seemingly abject and afflicted, was ultimately not its audience, consumer, or beneficiary, which reiterated the marginalization and inequality I saw around me.

I begin with this narrative because it captures the paradox inherent in my experience working on scholarship that is at once intellectually compelling and a source of emotional ambivalence, aesthetically resonant yet socioculturally taboo. Madness works powerfully as a metaphor; mental illness, as a reality, is a minefield that individuals, families, communities, and entire social systems often, at the very best, stumble through. Black creative writers return to psychopathology again and again in their written texts—including fiction, nonfiction, memoir, poetry and plays—mining its pathos, ambiguity, disjunctures, and multiplicity for the rich emotional and symbolic reserves informing their imagined worlds or reproduced realities; the critics who specialize in those works often step gingerly around its chaos. However, in conceptualizing this book, I feel it essential to address the trenchant critique posited by Marta Caminero-Santangelo in her *The Madwoman Can't Speak: Or Why Insanity Is Not Subversive*. According to Caminero-Santangelo, generations of feminist theorists have romanticized the figure of the madwoman, using her as a symbol of gender transgression and political protest in situations that would generally indicate otherwise. Rather than a “rupture with constraining traditions and stale conventions”(17),<sup>1</sup> she stresses that, in twentieth-century narratives by American women creative writers, and in her own estimation, madness is a site of powerlessness and erasure that underscores women’s marginalization, not their sociopolitical agency.

If the madwoman cannot function within the discursive tradition of a dominant culture, then she is effectively silenced rather than actively resisting. In nodding to Caminero-Santangelo, I have to acknowledge that a significant facet of my discomfort was realizing that there is danger in the proffering of the madwoman as an embattled heroine and madness as a strategic essentialism. The woman on the street was not a metonym. And the complexity of her life could not be contained within the metaphor of resistance. However, here I want to pause.

*Mad Epiphanies* focuses on “mad” heroines. Centered on the authors’ use of modernistic narrative strategies to disrupt the gridlock of the realistic novel and its received nationalist history, the book incorporates madness as both psychological disturbance and heightened mental state that leads the reader to each novelist’s deconstruction/re-writing of that state-sanctioned history. In my enthusiasm for the project, I decided to organize a series of panels to motivate me to work on the monograph. By attending conferences and presenting my ongoing research, I planned to write individual book chapters and thus efficiently complete the monograph within a set period of time. As is often the case, however, my plans stalled. A pall hung over the project, in part because I was tired. I had only recently finished *The Black Female Body in American Literature and Art: Performing Identity*, my first academic monograph. But perhaps more ominously, I found that I could not reconcile myself to the contradiction of the madwoman as I was constructing her. I could not intellectually claim this figure I regarded with such emotional wariness. Nevertheless, although I was not making the progress I intended, the panel experiences permitted me a sense of a larger and more dynamic conversation than I was experiencing writing as a solitary scholar. In participating in the conferences and creating a conversation with other scholars around the diverse uses of madness in black women’s diasporic fictions, and specifically the aesthetic experimentation that became so emblematic a feature of this trope, I was allowed an important insight. While there is danger in the reliance on the “madwoman” as a romanticized figure constructed in opposition to the status quo, I also understood that the either/or of this proposition becomes its own fallacy. What became more important to me was the question of *why* so many black female diasporic writers were invested in incorporating mental illness in their fictional works,<sup>2</sup> and what specifically was allowed by “mad” or experimental writing? With that said, I was struck by what these narratives were revealing about the aestheticization of political protest. No less notable was

the representation of race and/or gender as these concepts are interwoven with the pursuit of social justice, and of blackness as an enactment of diaspora consciousness. While the scholars I had the opportunity to interact with were developing projects that paralleled or intersected with mine, they were often coming to very different conclusions or adopting distinctive routes to get there, a process exhilarating both to behold and to participate in. As I met these individuals, and read and listened to their words, I felt that I was becoming a part of a community of scholars with complementary yet distinctive experiences and investments in the field; I wanted the experience to continue. I contacted Johanna Garvey, of Fairfield University, a friend and colleague with whom I had organized the 2013 MLA panel, “Madness and Mayhem in Women’s Novels of the Black Diaspora,” and together we decided to co-edit this essay collection.

In constructing *Madness in Black Women’s Diasporic Fictions: Aesthetics of Resistance* as a collection of scholarly essays by a range of literary critics, Johanna and I specifically wanted to produce what a single-authored monograph could not provide: the strength of multiplicity, the intellectual thrill generated by a diverse community of voices analyzing these diasporic novelists and their dynamic fictional works and worlds. This project was rooted in panels hosted by the MLA, NeMLA, and the ALA<sup>3</sup>—and the vibrant conversations that blossomed from there; we felt it was crucial to witness their development as a scholarly text that could be shared beyond those specific moments. This is not a conference procedural but rather the cultivation of conversations that began as individual research, grew into a multifaceted and polyvocal dialogue, and one we want to see continued beyond the scope of this volume. Rather than one specific way to interpret psychopathology in fictional narratives of the black diaspora, it becomes a means of creating a map to better comprehend those cross-cultural networks, intellectual currents, and forms of artistic exposure that have influenced the development of what I only loosely term this tradition. It is finally to underscore the fact that the existence of these works is neither haphazard nor incidental but instead related to the continuing histories of interpersonal engagement, aesthetic exchange, political struggle, and cultural evolution—for generations of creative writers and the scholars who study them.

With this said, there is a broad and increasingly diverse field of studies on female psychopathology in fiction. Classic scholarship often orbits around Anglo-American works, largely novels from the Victorian to the modernist era of the first half of the twentieth century. Foremost



among these is Sandra Gilbert's and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic*,<sup>4</sup> with its madwoman as authorial double who inscribes onto the written page feminist rage and anguish Elaine Showalter's *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830–1980*<sup>5</sup> provides a social history of the expansion of male-dominated British psychiatry; each chapter presents the female psychiatric patient as a signifier of the laws, customs, literary output, and sexual anxieties of the larger society. *Invalid Women: Figuring Feminine Illness in American Fiction and Culture, 1840–1940*,<sup>6</sup> by Diane Price Herndl, posits the invalid as a site of both the political resistance and marginalization of American women, as well as the representation of cultural transformation, whether literary, medical, or historical. Jane Woods's *Passion and Pathology in Victorian Fiction*<sup>7</sup> explores the interrelationship of medicine and literature in the understanding of the interplay between mind and body and the gendering (both male and female) of this process.

Significantly, much of the work on women of color and madness/mental health can be found as journal articles or individual book chapters in either monographs or larger edited collections. I would argue that what results is that literary "madness" is conflated with whiteness. Scholarship on black women, in particular, is either dominated by work on a few celebrated writers or circumscribed within regional,<sup>8</sup> national, or linguistic boundaries. The two most notable texts on madness in black diasporic literature are Valérie Orlando's *Of Suffocated Hearts and Tortured Souls: Seeking Subjecthood through Madness in Francophone Women's Writing of Africa and the Caribbean*,<sup>9</sup> which examines works by Francophone women of the Caribbean, Sub-Saharan Africa, and the Maghreb, and Kelly Baker Josephs's *Disturbers of the Peace: Representations of Madness in Anglophone Caribbean Literature*,<sup>10</sup> a study that focuses on mid-twentieth-century Anglophone Caribbean literature across the gender divide. Several texts do incorporate women of color into broader investigations of mental illness and theorizations of wellness. Both Monika Kaup's *Mad Intertextuality: Madness in Twentieth-Century Women's Writing*<sup>11</sup> and Marta Caminero-Santangelo's *The Madwoman Can't Speak: Or Why Insanity Is Not Subversive*<sup>12</sup> offer analyses of women of color within their respective works. While not marginal to the greater framework, their discussions are circumscribed. Like the goal of her larger volume, which is to provide a global template of various genres of women writing madness, Kaup's examination of black women's texts is quite abbreviated, limited to a short chapter and scattered references. Caminero-Santangelo focuses on twentieth-century US writers, several of whom are women

of color; however, only Toni Morrison is African-American. Three more recent texts specifically examine novels by women of color or minority populations. Gay Wilentz's meticulous *Healing Narratives: Women Writers Curing Cultural Dis-ease*<sup>13</sup> considers five world writers in English (Native American, Maori, Afro-Caribbean, African American, and Jewish American) who use illness as a way to meditate on cultural alienation and offer a path to the retrieval of indigenous and/or hybrid healing traditions that promise greater spiritual equilibrium. Ann Folwell Stanford's *Bodies in a Broken World: Women Novelists of Color and the Politics of Medicine*<sup>14</sup> explores novels by US women writers of color, incorporating sickness and healing into questions of social justice, access to medical care, and bioethics. Hershini Bhana Young's *Haunting Capital: Memory, Text, and the Black Diasporic Body*<sup>15</sup> departs from psychotherapeutic models based on individual injury; instead, she relies on the metaphor of the ghost to capture the haunting and psychic/physical violence of historical and social injustice on the collective black diasporic body.

*Madness in Black Women's Fictions and the Practice of Diaspora* attempts to complement, contribute to, and further broaden the parameters of the current conversation. The authors of the fiction examined represent an inclusive and nonhierarchical intersection of diasporic literary voices—canonical as well as emerging—from Africa, the Caribbean, Europe, Canada, and the United States. In the process, the volume crosses cultural and national divides, staging overlapping but distinctive critical dialogues regarding the diverse uses of madness in the literary text and the role of aesthetics in its representation. It interrogates the function of madness in works invested in narratives of resistance, particularly as embodied in experimental writing practices. Central to this volume is acknowledging the significance of aesthetics in black women's fictional output. While the figure of the madwoman inevitably appears in *Madness in Black Women's Diasporic Fictions*, perhaps more crucial to this collection is the question of how and why the quest for social justice is mobilized within a specifically aestheticized framework. Thus, not only is "madness" what results from the experience of social and political injustice, here raced and sexed, by individual characters but it is often a narrative strategy that deprives the reader of the certainty allowed and enforced by both the realistic tradition and sanity as an epistemology and ontological construct. While this process has grown out of the radical technical innovations of the twentieth century, including literary modernism and postmodernism, its outcomes are diverse, influenced by intersecting yet distinctive aesthetic traditions and political histories,

transnational movement, and cross-cultural pollination. Yet what specifically do these forms reveal about how contemporary black women writers rely on the past to engage the present and (re)claim the future? As significantly, what does this process illuminate about the uses and construction of the black diaspora as an organizing principle?

The majority of the novelists explored in this collection rely on madness to serve as the refraction of the cultural contradictions, psychosocial fissures, and often-buried political tensions of the larger society. Throughout the African diaspora, various forms of cultural incursion have occurred that have adversely affected those of African descent. These have included the African, Atlantic, and Arab slave trades; the colonization of Africa and the Americas by European powers; the establishing of apartheid regimes and neocolonial nation states; and current patterns of global migration based on the often-gendered transfer of human capital from poorer nations to wealthy ones. Blacks have been subjected to social domination, economic exploitation, and political marginalization, both from without and within. The result has been movements of political and cultural resistance as well as persistent, if under-documented, psychic trauma. Within the fictional text, mental illness serves as an especially resonant metaphor for the disruption caused by oppression and by alienation not only from the larger social structure but, most pervasively, from the very self. Thus, the deconstruction and/or transformation of narrative form mirrors deeper psychosocial schisms: of individuals (usually women) on the verge, or in the midst, of psychic collapse; of societies that, constructed on inequality, buckle under the weight of injustice normalized as the status quo. In addition, with its tangled roots in often racist and hypocritical Western scientific discourses and legal history, structures of madness force the ultimate question: Who or what is (more) mad, the individual or the dysfunctional sociopolitical system creating the very classificatory systems? Nevertheless, to reiterate and reframe David Austin's rhetorical query: "[C]an we genuinely speak of authentic Black or diasporic memory, [as] a coherent experience drawn from disparate histories?"<sup>16</sup> In short, are these novelists speaking to each other, forging a dialogue across time and space? And if so—and I would contend that they are—how and why? We believe that the answer is in the affirmative as exhibited in our chapter breakdown, as mapped below.

In Part 1, "Revisiting the Archive, Reinscribing Its Texts: Slavery and Madness as Historical Contestation," *Madness in Black Women's Diasporic Fictions* explores how black women writers recreate and

deconstruct the archive as a fundamental component in both reimagining the black presence in history and rethinking the construction of history itself. Specifically, this section actively ponders the slave experience in the creation of black diaspora(s). Who gets to write history? How is it re-membered and subsequently recommitted to the page? The essays in this section examine how black women writers' reliance on experimental literary formats, including aesthetic hybridity, allows them to challenge histories premised on black invisibility by reclaiming and revising the very archival documents that have traditionally permitted and enforced the silencing and erasure of blackness. Madness then becomes not only a metaphor for the dispossession felt by individual characters but a pivotal aesthetic strategy that will force new ways of reading, engaging, and understanding history as both ancient past and active present.

In Chapter One, "The Violence of Displacement in Bernadine Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe*," Nancy Caronia explores *The Emperor's Babe* (2001), a work that calls into question the purity and privilege of contemporary Britain's whiteness by confronting notions of racial and gender tensions in London, aka Londinium, Britannia, AD 201—a heterogeneous outpost of the Roman Empire. Purposefully anachronistic, Evaristo's poem as novel emulates Ovidian epic form in order to examine violence as both the means and the refusal of individual and collective madness. Madness is represented through the spectacle of the arena as well as through the narrative's refusal to maintain linguistic accuracy. The narrator, Zuleika, the daughter of Sudanese merchant immigrants, switches between Latin and contemporary slang to reveal the ways in which she cannot occupy more than a tentative space in Londinium or in any of her relationships. In this configuration, violence is both sacrifice and self-gratification. Linguistic, cultural, and personal violence becomes the means through which to express or deny the madness of an oppressive and constraining social system.

Violence also marks Chap. 2, "Madness and Translation of the Bones-as-text in Marlene NourbeSe Philip's Experimental *Zong!*" (2011), by Richard Douglass-Chin. For Douglass-Chin, Philip's *Zong!* is ostensibly a long poem. However, the text destabilizes and re-imagines generic boundaries, becoming at times dramatic performance and at other times experimental novel. In doing so, it exposes the madness of a British legal system that, in the 1783 case of the slave ship *Zong*, labeled deliberately drowned Africans as "lost goods" to be insured. Douglass-Chin demonstrates how Philip breaks apart and then reconstitutes as novel/drama/poem the

standard English text of the original eighteenth-century document from which *Zong!* derives.

Chapter 3, “Embodied Haunting: Aesthetics and the Archive in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*,” returns to the archive as configured by Jacques Derrida. According to Victoria Papa, Derrida’s concept of archive fever presumes that to know history is to burn up in the feverish pursuit of the past. The archive thus testifies at once to the violence of forgetting and the desire to know—a desire that is aligned as much with the past as it is with the future. Taking Derrida’s concept as a lens through which to examine the archive’s disavowal of black female subjectivity, this chapter argues that Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved* (1987) presents a history of slavery in which the erasure of enslaved mothering within the archive is re-imagined as a transformative space to reclaim subjectivity within literature. In *Beloved*, Morrison enters the archive’s troubled space of deferred longing through a recuperation of the historical figure of Margaret Garner—an escaped slave who killed her daughter to prevent her daughter’s re-enslavement. Through the novel’s depiction of the troubled mother/daughter relationship of Sethe and Beloved, the creative reenactment of Garner and her daughter, Morrison transforms the archive’s erasure of Garner’s story into a literary testimony to trauma.

The second part of the collection, “The Contradictions of Witnessing in Conflict Zones: Trauma and Testimony,” focuses on works from areas of regional conflict. Central to each context is the role of gender in the experience of national unrest: these texts serve as a chronicle of black women’s experience of political disruption, displacement, and sociocultural marginalization. Madness thus functions not only as a tool of repression but a tactic to survive its physical and psychic assault. However, by juxtaposing the fabrication of the narrative against the materialization of the black female body upon the printed page, reenacting the slipperiness and elusiveness of the process through traumatized retellings, these essays both bear witness and interrogate the adequacy of the text to do so.

In Chap. 4, “Fissured Memory and Mad Tongues: The Aesthetics of *Marronnage* in Haitian Women’s Fiction,” Johanna Garvey explores manifestations of madness, resistance, and healing experienced by women in texts by two authors, one writing from within Haiti and one from its *dyaspora*.<sup>17</sup> The discussion centers on Evelyne Trouillot’s novel *Rosalie L’Infâme* (2003), a fictional evocation of maroons and the enslaved in Haiti leading up to the Revolution, and Roxane Gay’s recent novel, *An Untamed State* (2014), which recounts the kidnapping, rape,

and abuse suffered by a Haitian American woman in contemporary Port-au-Prince. Each text suggests how to stitch the torn fabric of Haitian history, both individual and collective, revisiting horrific acts in a process of testifying and witnessing. Drawing upon the figure of the maroon, Garvey argues that the female protagonists perform both literal and figurative *marronnage*, expressing themselves from the space created by rupture and *déchirure*. This space serves as a refuge that affords each of them the opportunity to remember, redact, and reflect as they tell their stories of madness and gendered/sexualized violence.

In Chap. 5, “‘Dark Swoops’: Trauma and Madness in *Half of a Yellow Sun*,” Seretha D. Williams proposes that Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), examines the systemic, individual, and gendered traumas of the Nigerian-Biafran War in an attempt to comment on the aftermath of empire. For Adichie, the postcolonial experience of an independent Nigeria is the beginning of a new chapter in the legacy of colonialism. Independence leads to the Nigerian-Biafran War of 1967–1970 and its resultant devastation. Within this framework, Olanna—after discovering the massacred bodies of her family members—loses control of her bodily functions and suffers psychosomatic paralysis of her legs, flashbacks, and paranoia. She attempts to narrate her traumatic experience; however, other characters silence her. She thus begins to experience dark swoops, which she describes as “[a] thick black descend[ing] from above and press[ing] itself over her face, firmly, while she struggled to breathe” (156). The dark swoops, a symbol of Olanna’s temporary madness, can also be interpreted as a characterization of Nigeria’s experience with colonialism. In this essay, Williams specifically explores the intersection of personal and national traumas and gendered representations of madness.

Chapter 6, Raquel D. Kennon’s “‘We Know People by Their Stories’: Madness, Babies, and Dolls in Edwidge Danticat’s *Krik? Krak!*,” analyzes emblematic scenes from *Krik? Krak!* (1995), Edwidge Danticat’s short story collection, that illustrate the nexus between writing, mothering, and the displacement of the Haitian diaspora through madness. Kennon argues that these matrilineal stories register madness not as a disease or impairment of mental functioning for the central female characters. These narratives can be perceived instead as strategies that map how women mentally distance themselves from the mayhem by which they are surrounded, including the often horrendous quotidian realities of life under dictatorship. Most strikingly, madness emerges in the thorny boundary between those alive and dead, and even the confusion between the corpse of a

human baby girl and a baby doll. The inability or refusal to distinguish between the animate and the inanimate allows the women to exert some measure of creative control over the trauma in their environments through the process of (re)fabrication. The slippage between a person and thing problematizes what it means to live in a state of political unrest.

Part 3, “Novel Form, Mythic Space: Syncretic Rituals as Healing Balm,” analyzes madness as it emerges from interstitial spaces of trauma and dispossession, of characters out of sync with both the social systems in which they live and their own deepest potential. Instead of a distant past or modern-day arena of sociopolitical conflict, the culturally and stylistically hybridized novels in this section move between them, simultaneously dismantling the concept of linear time; often, they are set within fanciful, frightening, or allegorical fictional landscapes. However, healing is as crucial as madness to the design of the text—healing as creolized ritual that both character and reader must submit to in order to symbolically return to the expunged past and reformulate appropriate responses not only to its depredations but to its cultural wealth. The novels discussed re-envision the initial trauma of slavery and subsequent dispossession, both acknowledging the impact of African and Atlantic slavery on diasporic populations and expanding the discourse beyond its framework. Through madness and healing as sites of psychic return, these novels become contemporary parables that allow the materialization of a symbolic path to cultural renewal and spiritual redemption.

Chapter 7, Majda R. Atieh’s “Sharazade’s Sisters and the Harem: Reclaiming the Forbidden as a Site of Resistance in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*,” offers an Islamic interpretation of Toni Morrison’s epic novel. In so doing, Atieh consults the historical records and cultural studies of the institution of the Islamic harem to better comprehend the literary architecture of Morrison’s text. Central to this process is her investigation of the construction of speech. For Atieh, the oral narration and competing voices in *Paradise* (1997) can be perceived as being aligned with the rhetoric of Shahrazade. She thus demonstrates how the novel, with its suggestions of the harem and *hijab*, transforms itself into a subversive act of narratological mimicry. As in *Arabian Nights*, Morrison’s oral harem relies on an elliptical structure of framing that transforms scenes of madness into women’s healing and solidarity.

Chapter 8, “Magic, Madness, and the Ruses of the Trickster: Healing Rituals and Alternative Spiritualities in Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day*, Erna Brodber’s *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home*, and Nalo Hopkinson’s *Brown Girl in the Ring*,” explores the strategic deployment of the



trickster/conjurer figure in the work of New World, Afro-diasporic fiction. According to Caroline A. Brown, in each of the works listed above—by the Afro-Jamaican Brodber (1980), the Jamaican-Canadian Hopkinson (1998), and the African-American Naylor (1988)—culturally alienated protagonists are driven to the brink of madness by social circumstances and their own emotional ambivalence; they are then directed onto psycho-spiritual quests by creolized healer figures. Yet these healers are symbolic tricksters, individuals who cannot easily fit within a Western paradigm based on moral precision or ethical clarity. Who, then, guides the reader? How does he or she effectively solve the literary puzzle, the enigma of the text, to attain what Gay Wilentz deems “cultural healing”? According to Brown, the reader—thrown into the increasingly disordered chronicle unwinding as mystery, myth, and ritual—must partake of that journey and, in so doing, actively decipher and define what is madness and what is sanity, in the process untangling the web of the novel as a cultural riddle.

In Chap. 9, “Recordless Company’: Precarious Postmemory in Helen Oyeyemi’s *The Icarus Girl*” (2005), E. Kim Stone argues that Oyeyemi, like many third-generation novelists of the Nigerian diaspora, reimagines the coming-of-age tale as a narrative of transnational subject formation. When the novel opens, Jessamy Harrison, an 8-year old with an English father and a Nigerian mother, despondently hides in cupboards and underneath beds in her London home, preferring to spend her time reading and “amending” classic Anglo-American girls’ texts—*Little Women*, *A Little Princess*—rather than interacting with girls her own age. Her low spirits rise on a trip to Nigeria, where Jess befriends Titiola, a girl whom only Jess can see. Like Jess’s parents who bring her to a psychiatrist back in London, Western readers of *The Icarus Girl* would find it easy to interpret Titiola as an imaginary playmate produced from Jess’s mental instability. However, Oyeyemi quickly dismisses psychiatric discourse as too limiting to account for Jess’s “madness.” This essay argues that the novelist purposefully produces an intertextual entanglement of Yoruba vernacular paradigms with British Gothic aesthetics to implicate both cultures in the African slave trade. Just as Jess has “amended” the classic literary narratives of Western girlhood, she must disentangle Titiola’s unfamiliar aspects from this forgotten history of slavery and then interrogate the unsung potency of this re-memory in order to reconcile this fraught past with her burgeoning diasporic identity.

*Madness in Black Women’s Diasporic Fictions* is an important addition to scholarship on black women’s literature of madness because it analyzes the works of a range of black diasporic women writers within a



multiplicity of contexts, crossing temporal divisions, geographic boundaries, literary genres, and cultural divides. In addition, it incorporates interdisciplinary frameworks that borrow from psychology, history, literary theory, and aesthetics in interrogating the varied uses of madness in the works of diverse black women authors. In doing so, it maps the ways in which aesthetics matter, how they manifest political tensions, cultural change, national obsessions, and diasporic connectedness, thereby engaging race, gender, belonging, and citizenship. As significantly, it allows a greater understanding of the role of the aesthetic in the representation of black literary subjectivity—particularly its tangled roots in slavery and Western imperialism, twentieth-century literary movements, cultural exchange, political uprising, and geographic migration. Fundamental to this larger process is the volume’s interrogation of the very existence and organization of a black diaspora, of blackness as an identity that can cross—or transcend—national, regional, cultural, and/or linguistic boundaries. Yet what specifically do these forms reveal about the aestheticization of political protest? About blackness as an enactment of diaspora consciousness? About the representation of race and/or gender as these concepts intersect with the pursuit of social justice? This volume engages these questions within the structure of its diverse essay selection. We hope that this book will serve to enable both the production and elaboration of those conversations that are ongoing and those that have yet to begin.

## NOTES

1. Marta Caminero-Santangelo, *The Madwoman Can't Speak: Or Why Insanity Is Not Subversive*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 17.
2. There is a rich, developing tradition of madness as incorporated into diasporic black women’s fictional narratives. These include in the United States, Paule Marshall (*The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* and *Praisesong for the Widow*), Toni Morrison (*The Bluest Eye, Beloved, Jazz,* and *Paradise*), Alice Walker (*The Color Purple* and *Possessing the Secret of Joy*), Toni Cade Bambara (*The Salt Eaters*), Gloria Naylor (*The Women of Brewster Place* and *Linden Hills*), Gayl Jones (*Corregidora, Eva’s Man,* and *The Healing*), Carolivia Herron (*Thereafter Johnnie*), Edwidge Danticat (*Breath, Eyes, Memory*), and Ayana Mathis (*The Twelve Tribes of Hattie*); in the Caribbean, Sylvia Wynter (*The Hill’s of Hebron*), Erna Brodber (*Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home, Myal, and Louisiana*), Michelle Cliff (*Abeng*), Elizabeth Nunez (*Blue Hibiscus*), Jamaica Kincaid (*Annie John*), Marie-Elena John (*Unburnable*), Simone Schwarz-Bart

- (*Pluie et vent sur Têlumée Miracle*), Maryse Condé (*Heremakhanon*), Myriam Warner-Vieyra (*Juletane*), Marie Chauvet (*Amour, Colère, et Folie*), Suzanne Lacascade (*Claire-Solange, âme africaine*), Michèle Lacrosil (*Cajou*); in Canada, Dionne Brand (*In Another Place, Not Here*), Tessa McWatt (*Out of My Head*), and Esi Edugyan (*The Second Life of Samuel Tyne*); in Africa, Tsitsi Dangarembga (*Nervous Condition* and *The Book of Not*), Bessie Head (*A Question of Power* and *Maru*), Zoë Wicomb (*David's Story*), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (*Purple Hibiscus, Half of a Yellow Sun, Americanah*), Calixthe Beyala (*C'est le soleil qui m'a brûlée* and *Tu t'appelleras Tanga*), Mariama Bâ (*Un Chant écarlate*) and Ken Bugul (*Le baobab fou*); and, in the United Kingdom, Helen Oyeyemi (*The Icarus Girl*) and Bernardine Evaristo (*The Emperor's Babe*).
3. MLA: Boston, MA; panel: "Madness in Black Women's Diasporic Novels and the Aesthetics of Resistance" (January 2013); NeMLA: Boston, MA; panel: "Madness and Cultural Mourning in Women's Novels of the Black Diaspora" (March 2013); ALA: Washington, DC; panel: "Mad Writing in Black Women's Fictional Narratives: the Caribbean and the United States" (May 2014).
  4. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Guban, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979).
  5. Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830–1890* (London: Virago, 1987).
  6. Diane Price Herndl, *Invalid Women: Figuring Feminine Illness in American Fiction and Culture, 1840–1940* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1993).
  7. Jane Wood, *Passion and Pathology in Victorian Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).
  8. Mary Susan Lederer, *Tsitsi Dangarembga, Bessie Head, and Doris Lessing: The Social Context of Madness* (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1991).
  9. Valérie Orlando, *Of Suffocated Hearts and Tortured Souls: Seeking Subjecthood through Madness in Francophone Women's Writing of Africa and the Caribbean* (New York: Lexington Books, 2003).
  10. Kelly Baker Josephs, *Disturbers of the Peace: Representations of Madness in Anglophone Caribbean Literature* (Charlottesville, VA, and London: University of Virginia Press, 2013).
  11. Monika Kaup, *Mad Intertextuality: Madness in Twentieth-Century Women's Writing* (Trier, Germany: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag, 1993).
  12. Caminero-Santangelo, *The Madwoman Can't Speak*.
  13. Gay Wilentz, *Healing Narratives: Women Writers Curing Cultural Disease* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000).

14. Ann Folwell Stanford, *Bodies in a Broken World: Women Novelists of Color and the Politics of Medicine* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).
15. Hershini Bhana Young, *Haunting Capital: Memory, Text, and the Black Diasporic Body* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2006).
16. David Austin, *Fear of a Black Nation: Race, Sex, and Security in Sixties Montreal* (Toronto, ON: Between the Lines, 2013), 28.
17. The spelling that Haitians give to their specific diaspora, distinguishing it from the larger African Diaspora, is used here.

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PART I

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Revisiting the Archive, Re-inscribing Its  
Texts: Slavery and Madness as Historical  
Contestation

# Resisting Displacement in Bernardine Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe*

Nancy Caronia

*ain't no one never gonna write  
about your life but you. Once you're dead,  
you never existed, baby, so get to it.*  
Venus to Zuleika in *The Emperor's Babe*<sup>1</sup>

Bernardine Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe* (2000) is a literal and literary remapping of London. Set in AD 210 in a fictionalized version of Roman Londinium, Evaristo's idea for the novel emerged after she read Peter Fryer's assertion that a "[black] presence ... [in England] goes back some 2000 years."<sup>2,3</sup> Noting that the English landscape has "always been ... mixed racially and culturally," Evaristo predates her novel more than a millennium before British colonization.<sup>4,5</sup> Londinium's global population is drawn from the Roman Empire, which "stretched ... over 9000 kilometers into Africa and Asia," and those who colonize the metropolis enslave Britannia's indigenous people.<sup>6</sup>

Zuleika, the black female protagonist charting this multicultural landscape, immigrates to Londinium as a child with her parents, former slaves to the King of Meroe.<sup>7</sup> Her character is the establishment of

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black life on British soil well before any consanguineous presence to a present-day white English population. Zuleika's mapping of Londinium erases homogeneous depictions of the city, especially the "reign of 'Cool Britannia,' when [newly elected Prime Minister] Tony Blair's New Labor Party rebranded London as the global capital of coolness."<sup>8</sup> The New Labor Party's view reinforced a white nostalgic imaginary of imperialism where coolness was cast as a by-product of colonialist expansionism.

Zuleika's narrative acuity pushes against this construction through an unsentimental brand of linguistic cool. She intersperses Latin and anachronistic references to London at the Millennium to subvert the couplet form of Roman epic and Romantic poetry—genres that elevate the heroic. She ignores the verse ascribed to gods, warriors, or artists in favor of the slang spoken by a merchant-class black female subject. At once a diary, a memoir, and a cultural history, Zuleika's writing includes copious expletives and fashion by Armani, Gucci, and Valentino.<sup>9</sup> She references drinking "Dom Falernum," an allusion that at once recalls the twentieth century's popular champagne Dom Pérignon, a sweet syrup used in cocktails connected to the Caribbean during the height of British expansionism, and the name of a Roman wine popular during the Roman empire.<sup>10,11</sup> Her epoch-smashing verse deflects notions of the black woman as object or mad and unearths the madness of institutions across time and space. Her detail of Londinium's cultural life shifts perspective from those with privilege to those caught on the margins of political and economic power.

In Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's now-iconic reading of Bhubaneswari Bhaduri's death by suicide, Bhaduri's cultural narrative casts suicide as a political act inherent to avoiding institutionally and culturally constructed erasure. Bhaduri asserts agency and control of her life and death within the madness of a postcolonial system that chooses to ignore her humanity, her actions, and her voice. Her death sounds a warning regarding any endemically flawed and illogical system. Listening becomes key, not for what is absent, but to what information, groups, or individuals are pushed aside. Cultural narratives like Bhaduri's signal a warning that moves beyond economic calculations. The cost of repression focuses on how alternative ideas to material wealth become obstructed due to a single-minded focus on economic rather than cultural traditions or gender roles. Like Bhaduri, Zuleika's action, in this case, her written account of her Londinium life, is her resistance to erasure. As James Baldwin suggests, "That victim who is able to articulate the situation of