

Monstrous bodies, mad minds: Reading trauma through the body in Indigenous and diasporic contexts

MAD, COLONIZED BODIES

Within colonial narratives, traumatically violated racial bodies are often subsequently positioned as psychologically damaged, or mad. Representations of madness occasionally work to obscure the reality of colonial complicity in trauma; however, those same mad bodies can force acknowledgment of past wrongdoings and the traumatic after-effects of colonizing efforts. Through a reading of the character Sammy Aandeg in Drew Hayden Taylor's novel *Motorcycles and Sweetgrass*, and Dionne Brand's autobiographical collection of essays on displacement, identity, and belonging in *A Map to the Door of No Return*, I aim to show that "madness" might be read as symptomatic of ongoing colonial oppression. These texts follow, respectively, the traumatic history of residential schools in Canada, and colonizers' persistent efforts in both the Caribbean and Canada to obscure Black culture, resulting in violent conflict and a legacy of trauma. This article discusses seemingly background inclusions in Taylor's and Brand's texts in order to unpack the insidious effects of settler colonialism, reading "mad" colonized bodies as corporeal disruptions of a historical amnesia surrounding ongoing colonial trauma.

My purpose in bringing together works by these Anishnawbe and Caribbean-Canadian authors is to highlight the presence of a shared trauma between Indigenous and diasporic populations, founded upon violent British imperialism and settler colonial expansion. While Indigenous and Black histories, epistemologies, and cosmologies often differ, I believe that certain traumas express themselves in similar fashion. Reading physical and psychological trauma through mad bodies in literature

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provides particularly fruitful ground for a study in the ongoing effects of violent colonialism. Within a space of literary representation, we might consider how depictions of "monstrous" characters acknowledge trauma while resisting the rigid binary of the "mad/monstrous" racial Other and the sane, "normal" colonizer. This alternative approach instead focuses on the multi-layered responses to trauma and its after-effects.

If we understand madness as a means of political and social articulation, the works of Brand and Taylor appear as more than isolated literary texts. By writing on the "madness" of diasporic unbelonging, Brand explores the psychological aspect of uprootedness, while also referencing moments of direct physical violence. Taylor meanwhile writes the unsettling presence of the character of Sammy Aandeg as a disruptive, loud, inebriated force, yet also a character who continues to hurt deeply from his experiences (of sexual, physical, and psychological abuse) in the residential school system. In both *A Map to the Door of No Return* and *Motorcycles and Sweetgrass*, Brand and Taylor narrate "craziness" to confront silenced, unresolved racial traumas.

PERSISTENT TRAUMAS OF COLONIALISM

Dionne Brand's work engages with and challenges a Western "imperialist need

for obliterating the past of the colonized" (Ifowodo on Frantz Fanon, 2013, p. ix). In moments of linguistic resistance, Brand writes to question the erasure of trauma from historical narratives, inverting the view that "writing need not show your skin, it need not speak for trouble" (2001, p. 100). In *Map to the Door*, following the aftermath of the 1983 US-led invasion of Grenada and Brand's witnessing the deaths of many fellow citizens, she pointedly asks Caribbean-Canadian writer and activist Marlene NourbeSe Philip: "did we, did you go crazy after? Did you have trouble with life?" (2001, pp. 156, 169). Brand acknowledges the persistent traumas of colonialism in the very style and substance of her writing, picking at the wounds of a colonial past, "fresher still the older [history] grows" (2001, p. 62). Her question to Marlene begins her attempt to make sense of incomprehensible violence, which often manifests itself in moments of incomprehensibility, of speech, of thought, or of action; in these moments of supposed mental instability, her ethnic body becomes associated with madness. In *No language Is Neutral*, Brand writes: "When I came/back from Grenada and went crazy for two years, that/time when I could hear anything and my skin was/flaming like a nerve and the walls were like paper/and my eyes could not close" (1998, p. 239). Through her writing she reflects on the all-encompassing, often viscerally corporeal, aspects of "madness" resulting from having experienced severe trauma.

By positioning the "horrendous, violent, abrupt, ruptural breaks" of colonial history at the forefront of her writing, Brand engages with identity formation and displacement and belonging in the Caribbean, considering Stuart Hall's

Monstrous bodies, mad minds, page 18

assertion that “what we now call the Caribbean was reborn in and through violence” (2005, p. 547). This violence and rupture arguably contributes to feelings of unsettlement, which psychologically become difficult to bear—hence, Brand’s question to Marlene. Furthermore, the “mixture of the melancholy, fear, and anxiety that stems from cultural dislocation” is apparent in much of Brand’s work, which articulates “both the physical and emotional state of displacement,” and reflects the broader scope of physical and emotional convergence that this article explores through the lens of madness (Brand, 2001, p. 93; Haynes, 2013, p. 52).

HISTORICAL PAIN—RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL LEGACIES

Building upon Brand’s moments of reminiscing and literary resistance, I turn now to Taylor’s explorations in *Motorcycles and Sweetgrass* of “how to live without historical pain” (Brand, 2001, p. 157). While Taylor’s novel centres on the Ojibwa itinerant trickster (or Nanabush) figure John and his relationship with Otter Lake Chief Maggie and her sulking teenage son, Virgil, this article focuses on the community’s resident drunk, Sammy Aandeg. Despite being a minor supporting character, Sammy provides rich material for my analysis of colonial trauma. His appearance is a reminder of the colonial legacy of the residential school system in Canada, as he copes with the trauma of his experience through what appears to be madness: “Everybody just thinks he’s crazy old Sammy Aandeg, but there’s method to his madness” (Taylor, 2011, p. 172).

Indeed, Sammy’s behaviour aligns with what might be expected of someone suffering from PTSD, as, despite efforts to dull a traumatic past through alcohol, certain memories persist. He copes in select, although unconventional, moments when the “method to his madness” shines through. For example, I am interested specifically in his obsession with speaking in iambic

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pentameter, an apparent lingering effect of his British education and of having been forced to read *Hamlet* while locked in a shed as punishment for speaking Anishnawbe. Into adulthood, Sammy retains ties to “the forbidden language” (2011, p. 14) of Anishnawbe, speaking an odd mix of his Indigenous tongue and Shakespearean English, which erects barriers to understanding between him and the community, and reinforces the common perception of him as crazy. Thus, Sammy’s ability to communicate the horrors of his experience at the residential school is severely limited, and he communicates the only way he knows how—by attempting to reconnect with his Indigenous roots through his own pidgin version of English and Anishnawbe.

Sammy experienced physical and psychological abuse along with long-term trauma as a result of isolation, loneliness, and an unbridgeable distance from a support system of friends and family during his time in the residential school system. In the pursuit of “the intellectual emancipation of the Indian,” various abuses including “institutionalized pedophilia” were kept quiet so as to further the larger goal of “civilizing” the native peoples (Episkenew, 2009, p. 45; Grant, 1996, p. 229). Any rebelliousness or questioning of the residential school system was forcibly dissuaded, as “one did not wade against the current of the Angry Place” (Taylor, 2011, p. 11). While this abuse is only alluded to in Taylor’s novel, its psychological effects are apparent in Sammy’s demeanour. Besides communicating in

his unique creolized language, Sammy also turns to alcohol to dull the pain from his traumatic experiences. Ultimately, “no amount of bottles and their contents could drive away the demons; it could merely mute them for short periods of time” (Taylor, 2011, p. 254). While the traumas of colonial power still haunt Sammy’s everyday life, he continuously enacts small instances of rebellion, as he perverts the revered Shakespearean iambic pentameter as revenge against Father McKenzie and embraces the bottle.

WRITING THE CRAZY

Brand’s and Taylor’s works force readers to confront the emotional implications of trauma, including the psychological damage that leads some individuals to be driven “crazy.” Thus, writing becomes a political act as stories imbricate madness in their telling, subverting expectations and problematizing the binary between madness and normality. In both Brand’s and Taylor’s texts, “madness” arises from unbelonging and an inability to cope with that alienation. Yet, madness ultimately does not allow for the disappearance or rewriting of trauma. Brand and Taylor succeed, at least in part, in denying the repression of madness and allowing it to “[make] itself heard,” demonstrating how colonial madness “has survived as a speaking *subject* only in and through literary texts” (Felman, 2003, p. 15). I am cautiously hopeful that through exposure to writing that does not deny a horrific history of colonialism, I might agree with

Monstrous bodies, mad minds, page 33

Monstrous bodies, mad minds continued from page 18

Métis scholar Jo-Ann Episkenew when she states that “the creative process has restorative powers” (2009, p. 68). In order “to heal the wounds of oppression, and to reconcile our communities” (Episkenew, 2009, p. 194), writing must not dance around the issue of trauma in any of its forms—psychological, physical, linguistic—and must instead strive to write “‘liberating’ madness” through texts (Felman, 2003, p. 15). Ongoing trauma is an unavoidable fact of post-colonial realities, as made obvious in Marlene’s resounding “Yes” in response to Brand’s question of “did we, did you go crazy after?” (2001, p. 169). Writing the “crazy” thus becomes a political and emancipatory act, in denying the forgetting of violation and madness in all its forms. 🍁

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Indigenous immigrants continued from page 28

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