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Black Madness Masquerade in a Nineteenth-Century American Asylum

Mascarade de la folie noire dans un asile américain du XIXe siècle

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Abstract
At a crossroads where Black madness meets white sanism, Black bodyminds perish. What happens, then, at a juncture where white madness meets Blackness? This essay explores this intimate point of contact, focusing on the New York State Lunatic Asylum's institutional journal, *The Opal* (1851-1860), and blackface minstrel shows produced by an inmate performance group named Blackbird Minstrels. It examines the tension and dissonance that permeate these cultural productions by white women inmates who appropriated Blackness – in forms of Black ventriloquy and blackface minstrelsy – to create safe spaces for liberating self-expressions. Through racial transgressions, gender negotiations, and madness masquerade, the white women inmates at Utica could work through their hidden thoughts, forbidden feelings, and dangerous desires at the cost of Blackness. Though liberatory, the inmates' work ultimately reinforced the mutually destructive notion of race and madness, the cultural imagination of which still haunts twenty-first century America where Black mad/mad Black bodyminds are demonized, policed, and obliterated according to the dictates of whiteness. Informed by Mad Studies, Black Disability Studies, and Black Feminism, this essay carries out a historical memory work to shed light on today's mad lives at the intersections of race, gender, and madness. It grapples with what Toni Morrison calls "the choked representation of an Africanist presence" in white women inmates' mad narratives. In an attempt to undo the violence of appropriation, the essay uses the white narratives to foreground mad Black/Black mad peoples' lived realities.

Keywords
madness; Blackness; whiteness; womanhood; blackface minstrelsy; ventriloquism; institutional archive; disability masquerade; mad liberation; racial oppression

Résumé
À la croisée des chemins entre la folie noire et le sanisme blanc, les corps-esprits noirs périssent. Que se passe-t-il alors lorsque la folie blanche rencontre l'identité noire? Cet essai explore ce point de contact intime, en se concentrant sur le journal institutionnel de l'asile d'aliénées de l'État de New York, The Opal (1851-1860), et sur les spectacles de ménestrels en maquillage blackface produits par un groupe de détenues nommé Blackbird Minstrels. Il examine la tension et la dissonance qui imprègnent ces productions culturelles de détenues blanches qui se sont approprié l'identité noire – sous des formes de ventriloquie noire et de ménestrels en blackface –

pour créer des espaces sécuritaires pour s'exprimer de manière libératrice. Par le biais de transgressions raciales, de négociations de genre et de mascarade de la folie, les détenues blanches d'Utica pouvaient travailler sur leurs pensées cachées, leurs sentiments interdits et leurs désirs dangereux au détriment de l'identité noire. Bien que libérateur, le travail des détenues a renforcé irrémédiablement la notion mutuellement destructrice associant race et folie, qui hante encore l'imaginaire culturel de l'Amérique au XXIe siècle où les corps-esprits fous et noirs/noirs et fous sont diabolisés, contrôlés et anéantis selon les dictats de l'identité blanche. S'inspirant des études de la folie, des études noires sur le handicap et du féminisme noir, cet essai effectue un travail de mémoire historique pour mettre en lumière les vies folles d'aujourd'hui aux intersections de la race, du genre et de la folie. Il s'attaque à ce que Toni Morrison appelle « la représentation étouffée d'une présence africaniste » dans les récits de folie des détenues blanches. Dans une tentative de défaire la violence de l'appropriation, l'essai utilise les récits blancs pour mettre en avant les réalités vécues par les Noirs fous/fous noirs.

Mots-clés
folie; identité noire; identité blanche; féminité; ménestrel en blackface; ventriloquie; archives institutionnelles; mascarade du handicap; libération de la folie; oppression raciale

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Prologue: Reading Madness in Black and White

In February 2015, 37-year-old Natasha McKenna, a Black woman and a mother, was murdered while in police custody in Virginia. She lived with depression, schizophrenia, and bipolar disorder, requiring mental healthcare since adolescence (Crawford-Tichawonna, 2015). To transfer McKenna to a larger facility, a special response team was dispatched. The six-men team was so terrified of McKenna – who weighed about 58 kilograms, naked, and bound in her hands and feet – that the men came armed and in biohazard suits. McKenna was tased four times with 50,000 volts and lost her consciousness. She arrived at a hospital "brain dead" and died five days later (Smith, 2016). The official cause of death was cardiac arrest due to "excited delirium" which is not a medically established concept and has a racist origin promoted by physicians who have personal connections to law enforcement and the weapons manufacturing industry (Crawford-Tichawonna, 2015; Saadi, et al., 2022). Notwithstanding the murder, no criminal charges were filed against anyone involved. Being a Black woman living with madness, McKenna was a threat greater than anything, and protecting her civil and mad rights was not as important as alleviating the fear of full-geared men and ensuring their safety.

Four months later, 21-year-old Dylann Roof murdered nine people at the historic Mother Emanuel Church in Charleston, South Carolina. Resembling many domestic terrorists, Roof was a self-avowed white supremacist motivated by racial hatred (Konda, 2019). During his trial, his attorneys pursued insanity defence, arguing that Roof was "mentally ill" and unaware of his acts, thus deserving acquittal. Insanity defence, as one of the most controversial doctrines in criminal law, aims to show the defendant's cognitive and moral inability to know the nature of their crime, and though rarely successful, it is frequently used in mass shooting trials in America (Ewing, 2008; Metzl & MacLeish, 2015). Roof rejected the strategy, denouncing it as a "Jewish

invention." For Roof, madness was a degrading label that belonged to the realm of the inferior Other. Roof's statement was doubly oppressive towards Black bodyminds, because in the cultural process of racial making of American Jewishness, Jewish immigrants "Othered" Black people to recast themselves as white (Rogin, 1996; Roediger, 2005).[1] Nonetheless, Roof was allowed multiple competency hearings.[2] Insanity defence is meant to advance mad rights and disability justice, but Roof's attorneys showed how it can be abused. More importantly, Roof confirmed the stigma around madness in white supremacist culture from which also sprang the conflated notion of race and madness.

Madness comes into play differently in the aforementioned cases. Mad Studies informs us that madness is a fundamental human experience, a natural response to the madness-inducing world, and – unlike "mental health" which justifies confinement, colonialism, and other oppressive forces – a liberatory identity marker reclaimed by consumer/survivor/ex-patients (LeFrançois, Menzies, & Reaume, 2013; Ellis, Kendal, & Taylor, 2021). Nonetheless, at the intimate point of contact where madness meets Blackness, the self-expressive and liberating madness is unthinkable. In American cultural imagination, Blackness and madness are mutually constitutive. It is timelessly agreed that Black women's bodyminds have historically been monstrocized, persecuted, and policed (Crenshaw, 1991; Hull, Scott, & Smith, 1993; Roberts, 1997; Collins, 2000; Washington, 2006; Pickens 2019). At the crossroads where Blackness and madness intersect, Black bodyminds perish. McKenna's embodiment of madness divested

[1] The history of Jewish blackface minstrelsy demonstrates the relational construction of Jewishness as whiteness. Jewish immigrant performers in twentieth-century America produced blackface minstrelsy which was a lucrative show business and a peculiar means of upward mobility for Jewish people who needed to reidentify themselves as white and part of mainstream culture. Black-Jewish minstrelsy, as Michael Rogin (1996) puts it, "transfer[red] identities from immigrant Jew to American" (p. 95). This cultural phenomenon, however, reinforced the injuries of Othering, further aggravating antisemitism among white people who perceived Jewishness and Blackness as identical.
[2] James Ballenger, a forensic psychiatrist designated by the court, concluded that Roof does indeed live with "mental illnesses," but that none of them affected his moral competency.

McKenna of a chance to preserve or defend herself, whereas Roof's white male madness was used for sympathy and second chances. While Roof is kept alive, McKenna died, sitting at a point where Black woman's madness met white men's sanism. She was too far from being what Barbara Welke calls the "first citizen," a status of legitimacy exclusively reserved for white men (Welke, 2008). Historians of law argue that since the nineteenth century, white men have been the "default legal persons" who had self-sovereignty and legal authority to act with free will and without consequences, and they defined the boundaries of personhood and citizenship (Welke, 2008; Blumenthal, 2016). Meanwhile, Black men and women were pushed to the margins as unbelonging beings, the issue of their legitimacy often on trial (Pascoe, 2009; Han, 2015).

As McKenna's death shows, whiteness destroys Black madness. What happens, then, at a juncture where white madness meets Blackness? This essay grapples with this question and explores the nineteenth-century cultural productions from the New York State Lunatic Asylum at Utica, namely the asylum's institutional journal, *The Opal* (1851-1860), and blackface minstrel shows produced by an inmate performance group called Blackbird Minstrels.[3] It foregrounds different sites of tension and negotiation where white women inmates identified themselves with Black subjects and then appropriated Blackness – or, more accurately, what they thought was Blackness – to experiment with the boundaries of madness, womanhood, and whiteness. This unique form of Black madness masquerade, manifested in the inmates' use of blackface performance and Black ventriloquism, lays bare the nineteenth-century American cultural imagination of race, gender, and madness as dynamic, mutually constitutive identity markers.

[3] Throughout the essay, I use the term "inmate" rather than "consumer" or "service user" to emphasize the spatial limits Utica women faced as institutionalized people. Moreover, historians argue that not all Opalians were self-committed and that there were women who compared the asylum to a prison in which one should abandon all their hopes (Dwyer, 1987, p. 9). For accuracy, I will not generalize the women's lived experiences of institutionalization by referring to them as willing consumers or service users. I refuse to use the term "patient" to resist the patronizing and pathologizing forces of nineteenth-century psychiatry. I use "mental illness" only when I am directly referring to doctors' or critics' remarks.

This essay aims to contribute to what Bren A. LeFrançois, Robert Menzies, and Geoffrey Reaume (2013) call "historical memory work" that deepens our collective understanding of mad lives, past and present. As one of the forces that move Mad Studies forward, historical memory work will "help liberate us from the particularities of the here and now, and help us connect contemporary antipsychiatry and Mad activism to the legacies of struggles past" (p. 15). Seeing madness as a socio-historical category with shifting attributes, Mad endeavours not only bring agency back to mad people but also enable the process of "stretching our imaginative horizons of time and space" (p. 15). Foregrounding inmates' perspectives and acknowledging their multiplicities are critical steps towards achieving disability justice for mad communities. More importantly, however, by connecting the past and present of mad lives in the U.S., this essay aims to illuminate why McKenna was not allowed to access that plurality of human experience and why she had to perish.

Historical, Cultural, and Critical Contexts

The historical context in which *The Opal* was produced and circulated necessitates reading the white institutional narratives through the lens of Blackness. In nineteenth-century America, race, gender, and madness defined and conditioned one another, granting or denying one's agency and legitimacy. As historians have shown, one's racial identity determined one's citizenship status which also depended on one's physical and mental fitness and economic productivity (Baynton 2001; Waggoner, 2016; Nielsen, 2019). Antebellum U.S. in particular used sanism to justify the system of slavery. White doctors invented diagnostic labels of mental disorders for enslaved people, such as *drapetomania* – a supposed "mental disorder" that made enslaved people run away – and *dysaesthesia aethiopis* – a "mental illness" that caused enslaved

people to feel sick and avoid work (Baynton, 2001, p. 38). After the Emancipation, the same scheme remained to justify freed Black people's disenfranchisement and segregation.[4]

Amid this injurious history emerged blackface minstrelsy, a cultural platform where Otherness was put on display for white entertainment. Since the early nineteenth century, the genre amalgamated American cultural imagination of race with complex white identity politics. Blackface minstrel troupes, made up of white male performers with their faces smeared with burnt cork, resorted to stereotypes and exaggerations, distorting the images of the Other, mainly representing the racialized and hypersexualized bodies of Black people. In his thorough investigation into the sociocultural implications of minstrelsy, Eric Lott (1993) states that minstrel shows reveal the "emotional demands and troubled fantasies" of white men, reflecting their needs to find an object for identification (p. 6). Also noteworthy is the ways in which performers tried to assert their masculine superiority through Black bodies, exposing white men's desire for and fear of "black penis" (p. 59).[5] Blackface minstrelsy, therefore, was a crucible of white supremacist ideas and interracial homoerotic desires. In other words, minstrelsy provided an outlet for self-comfort needs and cross-racial desires that were culturally forbidden, the ones that would have labelled these white men as mad. Troubled and transmogrified inside that crucible were Black bodyminds. Looking at whiteness through Blackness is proved useful beyond the nineteenth century. As Toni Morrison (1992) insightfully offers, white authors often "choose to talk about themselves through and within a sometimes allegorical, sometimes metaphorical, but always choked representation of an Africanist presence" (p. 17). What Morrison calls the "choked representation" was central to the cultural productions by the inmates

[4] See Baynton, 2001, pp. 37-39.
[5] In Lott's own words, "white male desire for black men was everywhere to be found in minstrel acts" (p. 168).

at the New York State Lunatic Asylum at Utica where forces of liberation and oppression converged.

Nineteenth-century asylums were sites of such contending forces, operating simultaneously on benevolent custodialism and violent idealism, standing at the centre of social and political debates (Goffman, 1961; Grob, 1994; Tomes, 1994). As one of the first publicly funded psychiatric institutions in the U.S., Utica Asylum was founded in 1843 amid the growing national interest in "mental illness." *The Opal*, edited and published by white inmates from 1851 to 1860, was a monthly journal containing inmates' poems, letters, essays, and drawings. It was later bound into ten-volume books, each volume with twelve monthly issues.[6] *The Opal* came into being when moral treatment – emphasizing work and entertainment which was believed to teach inmates self-control and positive mindset – was at its peak (Dwyer, 1987).[7] In pursuit of the trend, the Utica Asylum had a number of visiting musical bands and drama troupes which motivated some of its women inmates to create their own theatre group named Blackbird Minstrels in 1847.[8]

Historians and cultural critics have so far focused on the limited potential of *The Opal* as a radical medium, highlighting the asylum's power dynamics that must have precluded inmates' subversive agency (Dwyer, 1987; Eannace, 2001; Reiss, 2008). Benjamin Reiss (2008), for instance, argues that *The Opal* was a tool for both inmates and physicians. Seeing the inmates as rather passive recipients of psychiatric services, Reiss states that the inmates tried to demonstrate

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[6] The journal was discontinued under the regime of superintendent John Gray (in office 1852-1886) who, unlike his predecessors Amariah Brigham and Nathan Benedict who believed in the impact of moral treatment, pursued more somatic approaches to "mental illness." See Dwyer, 1987.
[7] Asylum activities such as writing and performing were part of the moral treatment regimen popular in the nineteenth century. With their limited knowledge in "mental health," physicians believed that manual work stimulated inmates' brains and made them "sane" again.
[8] Numerous editorial columns suggest that not only the inmates but also the asylum staff enjoyed the visits made by, for instance, the Amphion Band with "Mr. and Miss Pixley and friend" and by the Campbell Minstrels. See Patients of the New York State Lunatic Asylum, *The Opal*, 1854, pp. 283-84 (September issue from Volume 4).

their civility and modernity through writing, and that *The Opal* lacks any signs of "coded protests against authority," that is to say the physicians and superintendents who used the asylum space to promote an idealized way of living while pathologizing madness (p. 18).[9] Indeed, writing allowed the inmates to demonstrate their understanding of various modes of living and social cues approved by the asylum authorities. Moreover, attending or participating in minstrel shows allowed them to share cultural experience with physicians, momentarily putting them on an equal footing. In this regard, *The Opal* and Blackbird Minstrels seemingly lack subversive motives.

Despite the intriguing and important points Reiss raises, his analysis downplays the fact that the Utica inmates appropriated Blackness – on paper and on stage – to generate a shared sense of agency and liberation. Furthermore, Reiss' comparison between institutional psychiatry and slavery is deeply troubling. Reiss argues that the inmates were in a situation comparable to that of enslaved people: "Lunatics, like slaves, were deprived of the right to vote, to sign contracts, to make wills, and to hold property. Both blacks and the insane were viewed as children, with the asylum's triumph over madness paralleling the white race's subduing of the black" (p. 15). Similarly, in his discussion of blackface performers, Reiss states that "the outcast actors imitated figures who were equally outcast," and while one group was "tarred by blackness," the other group was "stigmatized by the label of insanity" (p. 51). For the inmates, Reiss continues, the minstrelsy symbolized a "fantastical twinning of self and [the] other" and simultaneously "a humiliating reminder of their similarity to the downtrodden figures they portrayed on stage" (p. 53). Even though Reiss occasionally qualifies his statements by acknowledging how the inmates could eventually regain their freedom whereas enslaved people did not have such options, Reiss' use of the "like race" analogy – such as when he states that

[9] Reiss points out that Opalians used the writing style common among white genteel writers, such as elevated genres of writing and pseudonyms, and that their writing is "so cheery and sugarcoated as to be beyond credibility" (p. 24).

mad inmates were "like slaves" and that madness was "like blackness" – ominously permeates his book.

While Reiss saw limited potential in Utica inmates' creative work, others foregrounded the inmates' potentially subversive agency. Maryrose Eannace (2001) argues that the inmates' voices of resistance can be easily found in *The Opal* and that Opalians used the journal not to appease their physicians but to "rewrite the social definition of madness" (p. 6).[10] Furthermore, the writers attempted to reimagine their place in society, aiming to "counter the cultural images of the lunatic as incapable, incurable, useless, and of course, silenced by institutionalization" (p. 224). While Eannace, like Reiss, acknowledges the inmates' shared desire to prove themselves "sane," her argument differs from Reiss' in that it deems Opalians not oppressed but privileged – they were "private patients rather than wards of the country" – and their journal "a lunatic version of the parlor literature" (p. 90; pp. 203-204). Similar to Eannace's reading of putatively highbrow writing in *The Opal*, historian Ellen Dwyer (1987) foregrounds the journal's classist undertone. Dwyer stresses that white inmates from the "first wards" not only abused their attendants who often had working-class backgrounds, but they were also unwilling to share their space with those whom they called "social inferiors," namely poor inmates – many of whom were Irish immigrants – and Black inmates (p. 24).

While both Eannace's and Dwyer's analyses imply that the Opalians had a clear agenda, neither of them acknowledges the centrality of the "choked representation" of Blackness in the inmates' creative spaces, ultimately sharing the same drawback apparent in Reiss' work. Reducing *The Opal* to an institutional propaganda or a pastime for bored inmates fails to reflect

[10] Tracing Opalians in inmate casebooks which contain inmates' personal data, Eannace (2001) demonstrates that the majority of Opalians were highly educated, came from upper-class families, and even had personal connections to the blooming field of psychiatry. They were also from either the first or second wards where non-violent, self-committed, or exemplary inmates were housed.

on the exploitative moments that liberated white inmates but oppressed Black bodyminds. Such readings, accompanied by "like race" analogy, condone and normalize white appropriation of Blackness while unfairly and injuriously equating race and madness. They not only erase the lived realities of Black people but also reinforce the conflated notion of race as disability and disability as race.

Illuminating white disability narrative at the cost of Black bodyminds has been identified as one of the major setbacks in Disability Studies. Christopher M. Bell (2006) argues that the field deserves the name "white Disability Studies," as it resonates with white voices while those of Black people are pushed to the margins. In order to achieve true disability justice, Bell urges us to bring Disability Studies and African American Studies into conversation. Revisiting Bell's exhortation a decade later, Therí Alyce Pickens (2017) argues that though Bell's call has been responded to, as we now have a greater body of Black Disability Studies work, the majority of scholars focus on physical disabilities while Black madness still remains a delicate subject. Pickens (2019) argues that Blackness and madness are mutually constitutive in American cultural imagination, yet notwithstanding their "beneficially disruptive" nature, Black Studies and Mad Studies only "used the discourse of the other to metaphorize its own conditions" (p. 17). Indeed, the lived experiences of Black people living with madness have been largely ignored, and the oblivion has material impact on Black people, especially Black women whose access to healthcare is often denied, calling for a radical shift of direction in our scholarly endeavours and activism (Mollow, 2006; Metzl, 2009; Pickens, 2019; Schalk, 2022). From Bell's time to that of Pickens, the conflation of Blackness and madness still calls for our serious engagement. Above all, the state-sanctioned murder of Natasha McKenna further urges us to

consider how race, gender, and madness are conflated in ways that injure, confine, and obliterate Black bodyminds at the whims of white bodyminds.

It should be noted that McKenna's painful death is not an isolated incident but a mirror image of the larger sociopolitical context in which many Black lives live and perish, thus calling for the framework of Black feminism that is geared towards abolishing all systems of oppression. When the Combahee River Collective was formed, the women – pioneered by Demita Frazier, Beverly Smith, and Barbara Smith – pronounced that Black feminism is a logical political reaction to the "manifold and simultaneous oppressions" that constantly and callously injure Black women living in the "system of white male rule" (Hull, Bell-Scott, & Smith, 1982, pp. 13-14). More importantly, commonly shared by Black women living in the U.S. are the "feelings of craziness" that undermine Black women's wellness and threaten their safety (p. 15). Meanwhile, the shared sense of madness has been recognized not as a larger social problem but as an individual misfortune. McKenna was one of many Black women who live(d) with madness without proper access to care and services they need.[11] As Frazier, Smith, and Smith state, all forms of Black feminisms inevitably have a "personal genesis," starting with an individual Black woman's life and then working towards a political discourse that affects all women's lives (p. 14). Indeed, when it comes to Black women's lives, what is personal is political (p. 17).

Resorting to the forces of mad past's reverberations for here and now, this essay responds to the calls made by Bell, Pickens, and the Combahee River Collective. While it shows the multiplicities of madness through the lives of white women inmates at Utica Asylum, it also aims to understand why McKenna was denied access to such plurality of human experiences. It hopes to foreground one of many historical roots of the access denial by looking back, by doing the historical memory work of Mad endeavours. Informed by Mad Studies, Black Disability Studies,

[11] See Mollow, 2006, pp. 86-87.

and Black Feminism, the essay brings Blackness to the fore and to the centre of its analysis of the written and performative work produced by white inmates at Utica, highlighting their appropriation of Blackness which enabled their liberation but reinforced their oppression of Blackness, violently buttressing the stigmas around Blackness as well as madness. The conflated, mutually destructive notions of Blackness and madness still resonate with today's white cultural imagination that took away many Black lives, including those of Tanisha Anderson, Michelle Cusseaux, Janisha Fonville, Daniel Prude, and Natasha McKenna.[12]

Ventriloquizing and Performing Black Madness

Inside *The Opal*, white writers discuss Black subjects to fulfill their needs for identification and self-assurance. A number of issues feature essays discussing "the Afric" – referring to Black people living in and beyond African continent – whom Opalians thought of as "the most unenlightened and oppressed," conveying the general sense of pity and sympathy.[13] Opalians depict Africa as a "barbarous" and "benighted" land of misfortune where people are abandoned by God and therefore in need of salvation by the "fair race."[14] Through patronizing compassion built upon white supremacist propaganda, Opalians underscore that Black and white subjects are inherently different.

The common white saviour complex with essentialist racism aside, Opalians use "Africs" to ultimately draw attention to – and elicit sympathy for – themselves. In a poem titled "Has

[12] Tanisha Anderson (Cleveland, OH) lived with bipolar disorder. When her family called for an ambulance, police officers showed up and restrained Anderson on the ground and killed her. She was 37 years old. Michelle Cusseaux (Phoenix, AZ) lived with bipolar disorder and schizophrenia. When she called for assistance, a mental healthcare provider felt threatened and called the police. The police arrived and shot her. She was 50 years old. Janisha Fonville (Charlotte, NC) lived with mood disorder, and when her family called the police to prevent self-harm and take her to a mental hospital, the officers arrived and shot Fonville. She was 20 years old. Daniel Prude (Chicago, IL) lived with depression and addiction following family tragedies. When his brother called the police for help during an episode, the officers pinned him to the ground until he died of asphyxia. Prude was 41 years old.
[13] See Patients of the New York State Lunatic Asylum, *The Opal*, 1854, p. 347 (November issue from Volume 4).
[14] See Patients of the New York State Lunatic Asylum, *The Opal*, 1851, p. 53 (July issue from Volume 1).

Thou No Friend?", an anonymous poet calls out to the pitiful subject, "poor, smitten son of Afric," and comforts the African son by ensuring that they will be his friend and saviour who will "hear at last, / And burst in sunder all thy chains."[15] After pronouncing their friendship, Opalians draw a juxtaposition between themselves and the African son, equating madness with Blackness. An editorial published in the same volume similarly argues that race and madness were part of God's plan: "God has made different colors and styles of mind, and mental and moral taste, in those composing the races and nations of men."[16] It further states that "our natural revulsion from persons of color is by no means as great as that from white persons who have erred with too much aggravation."[17] Those who have erred – such as Opalians themselves who rejected social norms – supposedly elicit revulsion stronger than racial hatred. Commiserating with and then identifying themselves with Black people, Opalians wrote for collective self-pity, self-comfort, and self-assurance. Rather than helping the poor Black son of Africa, the inmate writers and their readers were helped by the Black son who gave them their sense of self and agency.

In other instances, Opalians engage in more covertly subversive writing through Black ventriloquy to express thoughts, feelings, and desires suppressed by the asylum authorities. In a poem titled "A Valentine to Missy Dinah Crow," an anonymous poet relies on the voice of a Black narrator who pines for an unrequited love. Calling out to "lubbly, charmin Dinah Crow," the speaker of the 22-line couplet poem identifies himself as "Dis n— … blessed with promised love of thine."[18] While the speaker is "forsaken, / But faithful still, as Time doth show," Miss

[15] See Patients of the New York State Lunatic Asylum, *The Opal*, 1854, p. 103 (April issue from Volume 4).
[16] See Patients of the New York State Lunatic Asylum, *The Opal*, 1854, p. 345 (November issue from Volume 4).
[17] See Patients of the New York State Lunatic Asylum, *The Opal*, 1854, p. 346 (November issue from Volume 4).
[18] The line contains a damaging racial slur that served no other purpose than to reinforce Black people's Otherness, and I decided to redact it in order not to perpetuate the violence. See Patients of the New York State Lunatic Asylum, *The Opal*, 1854, p. 42 (February issue from Volume 4).

Dinah fell for "dat gouty, purse-proud Don" whose love is not as great as the poet's.[19] The blooming field of American psychiatry was on the watch for such expressions of passion, especially regarding unrequited love that was believed to trigger "mental illness." A broken heart, labelled as "disappointment in love," was deemed a legitimate cause for insanity throughout the 1840s and 1850s along with other pathologized feelings such as "jealousy" and "remorse."[20] The valentine poem is not only written in Black ventriloquy but also assumes a male voice. Considering how the contributors to *The Opal* were predominantly white and women, the poet crosses both racial and gender lines to convey the forbidden, mad feelings. In the nineteenth-century discursive context where Blackness was pathologized as much as madness was persecuted, *The Opal* provided a safe creative space where inmates could liberate themselves while reinforcing the oppressive conflation of Blackness and madness.

The Opal also demonstrates how inmates pursued other projects in search of safe spaces for liberation, such as blackface minstrelsy which similarly fulfilled the inmates' needs for identification and self-affirmation but resulted in racial oppression. Blackbird Minstrels' performance often appears in *The Opal* editorials. One of their most popular productions in 1854, "A Kitchen Down South," featured two Black characters Dinah and Sambo, and two white characters Rosa and Caesar. While the four characters juxtaposed different racial and gender identities, they were all performed by white women inmates at Utica. It would be an understatement to say that the depictions of Dinah and Sambo – dancing and singing in exaggerated ways and exploding with emotions – were offensive. As a highly racist and

[19] See Patients of the New York State Lunatic Asylum, *The Opal*, 1854, p. 42 (February issue from Volume 4).
[20] The administrators at Utica Asylum conducted annual reviews to assess the asylum's state of operation. Included in the annual review each year was a list of "causes" for which inmates were committed. For instance, see Managers of the State Lunatic Asylum, 1848, pp. 36-37. In 1851, "disappointment in love" was the eighth most common cause of madness among Utica inmates (Managers of the State Lunatic Asylum, 1851, p. 32).

culturally injurious form of entertainment where race, gender, and madness converged, blackface minstrelsy presented several opportunities for white women inmates.

First, the inmates used minstrelsy to find comfort in madness. Performing or observing unrestrained Dinah and boisterous Sambo, the actresses and their audience felt liberating pleasure. One editorial column reads,

> The first night we laughed – we could not help it; but the second our risibilities ran riot, completely convulsing us. – More of the laugh and enjoy yourselves we wish not; and the varied character of the programme promised not only this, but more than fulfilled our expectations, which were not small, *knowing from whence come our joys*.[21]

Entitled "The Ladies' Entertainment," the editorial extends two full pages with its in-depth analysis of the production, highlighting how the show elicited "convulsing" laughter from the audience and how the inmates collectively knew the root of their joy. During the show, the women inmates could temporarily release themselves from the rigid and institutionally enforced ways of being. Simultaneously, they could reclaim their madness as their own, even if momentarily, as they were seeing not merely an entertaining burlesque but a drama in which their fellow inmates embodied cavorting and dangerous madness with "ease and composed air."[22]

It should be noted that Blackbird Minstrels not only crossed race lines but also experimented with non-binary gender identity which was considered a "mental illness" in nineteenth-century America. Restoring "proper" femininity and masculinity in inmates' words and behaviours was one of the asylum staff's primary goals, as illustrated in the case of A. S. M., one of the most frequently contributing Opalians and a long-term inmate at Utica. Often caught

[21] See Patients of the New York State Lunatic Asylum, *The Opal*, 1854, p. 343 (November issue from Volume 4); emphasis added.
[22] See Patients of the New York State Lunatic Asylum, *The Opal*, 1854, p. 342 (November issue from Volume 4).

wearing women's attires, he was committed by his brother due to this "irregular habits of dress" and constant feelings of confusion (Reiss, 2008, pp. 23, 49). Mirroring A. S. M.'s non-normative gender behaviours, some Blackbird women wore trousers to play Sambo, embodying Blackness and masculinity simultaneously on stage, while others performed Dinah who was an unbridled Black woman mangling her dress, symbolically destroying the socially imposed gender roles. Crisscrossing racial and gender lines, the women tested the boundaries of madness as well, acting in ways that go against the asylum authorities' expectations on "proper" embodiment of white womanhood. To protect their venue for liberating self-expressions, the women prior to their performance reminded the audience that "whatsoe'er ye hear is gather'd from the troubled mind."[23] Resembling what Tobin Siebers calls "disability masquerade" – a survival strategy devised to protect one's bodymind by foregrounding or exaggerating one's disability – these women strategically undermined their own work by drawing attention to their madness, arguing that everything you see came from the minds of the distressed and, therefore, there is no need to raise the alarm about the madness of it (2008, pp. 96-98). Blackbird Minstrels' performance, full of well-calculated racial transgressions, gender negotiations, and madness masquerade, helped white women inmates work through their hidden thoughts, forbidden feelings, and dangerous desires without punishment.

In addition to allowing the inmates to live their mad lives fully, blackface minstrelsy fulfilled another self-serving purpose for inmates. Hiding behind the mask of mad and gender-defying Blackness, the inmates could promote sensitive political agendas. Feminism, for instance, was deemed a warning sign of both deviant gender identity and what the physicians labelled "political excitement," asking for caution when the inmates expressed their views on

[23] See Patients of the New York State Lunatic Asylum, *The Opal*, 1854, p. 342 (November issue from Volume 4).

it.[24] Through minstrelsy that provided multiple protective layers of alternative subjecthood, however, Blackbird Minstrels could inspire their fellow inmates to radically reimagine their womanhood. The editorial on "A Kitchen Down South" suggests,

> Seldom have we been more highly pleased and entertained than on the successive evenings we witnessed the admirable display and dramatic skill of our Ladies; and, tho' no friend to "Woman's Rights," or Bloomerism, yet, we must say for once, we liked to see women *wear the breeches*.[25]

While carefully repudiating their association with the woman's rights and suffrage movements, Opalians praise Blackbird Minstrels' ambitious attempt at embodying masculinity and expanding the potential of womanhood. Wearing breeches with much "capacity and versatility," white women inmates conveyed "the varied passions and emotions which sway the human heart," motivating their audience to be more than just ideal, well-behaved women.[26] Performing Sambo in breeches and acting up as dress-mangling Dinah during their show, the inmate actresses resisted the limiting beliefs about white femininity. They strategically foregrounded their madness and hid behind the mask of Blackness to protect their safe outlet for mad needs and mad political desires. Similar to their use of Black ventriloquy in *The Opal*, Blackbird Minstrels' performance reinforced the injurious cultural construction of Blackness – through the bodyminds of unrestrained Sambo and mad Dinah – in order to communicate their mad visions.

Ultimately, Blackness was used to help white women inmates to locate pride and pleasure in their mad identities. The two-page commentary on "The Ladies' Entertainment" concludes by encouraging the inmates to be inspired by the characters on stage and to fill their minds with

[24] Managers of the State Lunatic Asylum, 1847, pp. 36-37.
[25] See Patients of the New York State Lunatic Asylum, *The Opal*, 1854, p. 342 (November issue from Volume 4); emphasis in original.
[26] See Patients of the New York State Lunatic Asylum, *The Opal*, 1854, p. 342 (November issue from Volume 4).

"generous emotions and lofty ambition."[27] It argues that there is a certain "power and influence of lunacy in promoting the happiness and well-being of the human race." It reads,

> Take courage, wisdom and virtue from these fair representations of the different varieties of the species, that you hold up your heads, and speak as loud and plain as they the importance of your attributes to the permanency of society.[28]

In order to appreciate their lot and feel good about – and take pride in – themselves, the inmates were urged to look down, to compare themselves to Sambo and Dinah. Here Blackness is a channel through which the inmates could fulfill their needs for agency while challenging and reconfiguring the boundaries and meanings of their madness. Through blackface minstrelsy, they were promoting what seems to be a crude version of today's Mad Pride movement but built on essentialist racism, white supremacy, and appropriation of Blackness, reverberating with liberatory yet oppressive forces at the same time.

Caring for Black Bodyminds to Liberate All Bodyminds

The Utica inmates' various acts of subversion were all possible because Blackness provided a safe venue for mad self-expression, helping them regain their agency as mad white women. By appropriating Blackness in writing and on stage, the inmates could transcend the boundaries of gender as well as madness, acting and acting out their madness instead of acting up to the rules and expectations of the asylum. Through their mad voices and the deviant bodies of Sambo and Dinah, the inmates sabotaged the asylum authorities' goals of enforcing sanism upon them. Their creative spaces allowed self- and communal liberation at the cost of Black bodyminds, reinforcing the injurious narratives about Blackness and, ironically, madness as well.

[27] See Patients of the New York State Lunatic Asylum, *The Opal*, 1854, p. 349 (November issue from Volume 4).
[28] See Patients of the New York State Lunatic Asylum, *The Opal*, 1854, p. 348 (November issue from Volume 4).

For the white women inmates, Blackness was a crutch, and it was a stolen one. With it they communicated their needs and desires, embodied and manifested their madness freely, and regained their subjecthood eventually, transient though that may be. The stories from Utica Asylum present themselves as yet another piece of American history where Black bodyminds were utilized for the benefit of whiteness.

The nineteenth-century white collective imagination of Blackness thus was conflated with madness. Madness was a fluid and dynamic identity marker dependent upon other identity markers such as race and gender. White women inmates at Utica tried to redefine madness and establish a community of care and support within the institutional walls. However, their philosophies and methods were fraught with tension and dissonance, and their work was a harbinger of other shaky social movements, namely the first- and second-wave feminisms for which activists at one time disregarded the presence of Black women and at another time more explicitly used Blackness to highlight white women's competence and fitness as legitimate citizens. Even when clamouring for the equality of all women across various social strata, white feminists have not included Black women's voices and lived experiences. What Anna Julia Cooper in 1892 called the epistemic injustice that invalidates Black women's knowledge pervades in white feminism, past and present, which the progenitors of Black Feminisms argue to be one of the major concerns that hinder Black women's liberation (Hull, Bell-Scott, & Smith, 1982, pp. 21-22).[29] The struggle continues. In contemporary feminist activism, Black women are used as a prop, their bodyminds metaphorically signifying the inclusivity and complexity of white feminism. Jennifer C. Nash (2019) poignantly stresses how American feminist activism and the academic endeavours of U.S. women's studies have little interest in "the materiality of black women's bodies, and the complexity of black women's experiences, or the heterogeneity

[29] Cooper, A. J. (1892). *A Voice from the South: By a Black Woman of the South*. The Aldine Printing House.

of black women's intellectual and creative production" (p. 4). Even within the spaces of coalitional feminist effort, Black women carry out the most "consistent and ethical political labor," such as voting and demonstrating, while white women comfortably rely on their labour (p. 133).[30] White women's work of social justice, therefore, requires reassessment and re-strategizing, calling for more serious activist and scholarly engagement with Black women's lives. Working towards liberating Black women's bodyminds will result in everyone's freedom, as Demita Frazier, Beverly Smith, and Barbara Smith remind us, because Black women's liberation requires destroying all systems of oppression, which will lead to liberating all people (Hull, Bell-Scott, & Smith, 1982, pp. 18-19).

Exclusionary activism, as time shows, is never successful. Empowering one group of population by divesting another group of their voices and presence is not a sustainable work of social justice. Indeed, while Utica inmates could cross the boundaries of madness and gender, challenging the definitions of mental "fitness" and womanhood and demonstrating their mastery both of sanity and insanity and of masculinity and femininity, they could not master Blackness or disrupt the boundaries of race, because their performance was not based on empathy or care; it was based on the sentiments of pity, white saviourism, and essentialist white supremacy. It gestured toward not coalition but appropriation. Twenty-first-century America still thrives on these injurious frames of thought. While Dylann Roof's case reassured us of how madness can be perceived with pity in white bodyminds, Natasha McKenna died without access to proper healthcare and accommodations she deserved, having shown how madness in Black women's bodyminds is regarded as a threat to society that needs to be destroyed as quickly as possible.

[30] Nash (2019) discusses the much-circulated photograph from the Women's March in Washington, D.C. in 2017, in which Angela Peoples holds a sign that reads "Don't Forget: White Women Voted for Trump" while three white women wearing "pussy hats" take celebratory photographs of themselves on a podium behind Peoples. This image encapsulates "the historical labor of black women, [and] the failure of white women to act as 'allies'" (p. 135).

The first step towards mad justice for Black people may be to recognize, as Toni Morrison teaches us, the ways in which white imagination and appropriation of Blackness reveals "the fears and desires that reside in the [white] writerly conscious. It is an astonishing revelation of longing, of terror, of perplexity, of shame, of magnanimity" (1992, p. 17). Indeed, at such junctures where Blackness and whiteness meet in American cultural history, it is almost always about whiteness.

As Sami Schalk (2022) unequivocally argues, to Black people, disability is a political concern and, therefore, we must understand disability within the discursive context of white supremacy. McKenna's death urges us to examine the cultural imagination of and material realities of Blackness, Black womanhood, and Black madness. McKenna's death also prompts us to reconsider both medical and social models of disability. We should lay bare and rectify the often-patriarchal violence embedded in the medical model, but individual needs for medical aids cannot be disregarded, especially when it comes to multiply marginalized people living with madness whose access is too often denied. Simultaneously, though it is important to address the issues of social barriers and build a coalitional effort for disability justice, we should acknowledge the lived realities of those for whom disability is a tangible psychosomatic embodiment beyond a social condition. As Therí Alyce Pickens (2019) beautifully puts it, a "mad Black/Black mad subject is not simply standing at an intersection but also actively changing it" (p. 22). The definitions of Blackness and madness have shifted over time, and as various American histories of Otherness show, mad Black/Black mad subjects have been excluded, monstrocized, and policed according to the dictates of whiteness and sanism. It is for this reason, as well as for the reason Morrison poignantly offers, that we must foreground mad

Black/Black mad peoples' own definitions of their (extra)ordinary minds which will illuminate the ever-shifting boundaries of race, gender, and madness.

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