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Loose Leaf

Lindsay Eales
PhD Candidate
Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation
University of Alberta
leales@ualberta.ca

Abstract

A shuffle. Do you experience the following? Cigarette smoke and white cheddar popcorn. It's all in my pretty little head. Crinkling paper bedsheets. Excess. A woman who swallowed a fly, leaves and steel. A polka-dot collar. Blink... Side effects are a misnomer. An artist's manifesto. Non-linear. I want to be disjointed, unformed, messy, hurting, mad. Madness is both personal and political. Through an autoethnographic series of performative poetry and prose, *Loose Leaf* intends to evoke encounters with some of the affects, experiences, and politics of madness and psychiatrization. It works to offer both an embodied and theoretical engagement with one form of mad performance, and to compel readers to perform a form of mad reading.

Keywords

Mad studies; Mad performance; Psychiatrization; Performative writing; Autoethnography

Print these
pages.
Shuffle them.
Read.

Cigarettes

I dig around in my overstuffed purse, my fingers grazing pens and steel clips and paper and lipsticks. The ritualized search for my fire-starter. I slip a cigarette, *Menthol Superslim*, out of the shiny package with the intentionally shaming photos on the front. Implied horrors of cancer, stroke, second-hand smoke, a malformed fetus... I inhale a burning flow into the back of my throat and taste copper medicine. My mouth grows dry as I roll menthol around on my tongue. A slow suicide is better than a quick one. ? .

The smoke erodes the university-educated veneer and exposes my roots. A slutty girl, a low class broad, a salute to my past. Where upward mobility was marrying rich. Where 99¢ soup made dinner each night. Where I dreamt of GAP t-shirts worn by wealthy kids. Where we scrubbed studio floors in exchange for dance classes. Where cigarettes were cheaper than prescription meds. Here, I learned to point my pinky finger down, balancing the long slim cigarette at the tip of my index and middle finger: a cultivated, gendered, grace. I drag. I drag.

I am brought back with a rush, a body flush, a concomitant regret. I smell like my father. I barraged him with shame, in chorus with the degrading photos on his cigarette pack, until his early death from a heart attack. I took up his habit a year after it killed him.

I will now choke my partner with my stench of formaldehyde and disgrace, clinging to me for hours, years. I am about to butt out, and to return to my partner who is dangerously allergic to smoke. Her throat tightens to a straw when I come near. My breath kills her breath. I will shower, and avoid her, to avoid having the cigarettes kill her too. This thought makes me want another. My cheeks blush, and I drag a little harder on my last puff... for now.

Insert thermometer into oral orifice here. ----->

Resist gag reflex

<----- Insert arm into blood pressure cuff orifice here.

Resist the command to run

Insert self into penetratingly steely stare of a triage nurse here.



She slices me up and brands me a crazy woman. Insert sinking in my chest orifice here. Crazy. Woman. Mistrusted. Dangerous. Faking. Flaky. Hysterical. It is all in my silly little head.

It's all in my pretty little head. Imaginary. An invisible friend. My body irrelevant. It's all in my head. Like intelligence. Like an aneurism.

A locked unit keeps me locked in, or out, of someone's reality. The walls bubble and wail. Relentless deep pressure. Screeching loud and dirty. Anesthetizing wash of pale blue paint chips away, revealing grating Pepto-Bismol pink. It coats and curdles my guts.

Huddling under a gaping hospital gown and a paper-thin blanket, I wrestle to cover my thighs like a lady. My lover is my comforter, covering me fully with a grounding weight and the smell of home. Uniformly puffed-up police territorialize the hallways, eclipsing the match-box window. Oh Fuck. My lover soothes my jagged breath. She assures me that the cops aren't after me, but the indigenous man lying bloody next-door. My skin grows increasingly chilled, naked, and white.

I take my pills, like a good girl. The greyness lifts and the numbness sets in. My throat swells allergic at the bitter chalky disc seeping into my blood. I swallow hard, push the panic down past my sternum. If I just will myself hard enough...

There once was a woman who swallowed a fly
I dunno why she swallowed the fly
Perhaps she'll die

The folding of days on days

My spotted dog Nugget launches herself onto my bed and laps at my face. I am running a fever. My breath tastes hot as it seeps up my throat into my mouth. My cheeks are heavy. My skin ripples, pricks, every hair standing on end. I draw the covers over my aching body, and Nugget's hard-lean against me is soothing. I am warmed by her offer of shared body heat. I sniff her feet: she smells of dirty river, mud and fun, white cheddar popcorn, comfort and love.

----- fold here -----

My spotted dog Nugget launches herself onto my bed and laps at my face. I am exhausted after a shitty night's sleep. Her insistence forces me into claustrophobic panic. My guts jump into my throat, and I am ready to throw her off the bed. She stinks faintly of urine and wretched meat breath. I clench my teeth and growl at her need to pee. As I begrudgingly pull on fur-covered sweats, her coarse discarded hairs needle their way under my skin. I am consoled only by the menthol cigarette that is coming my way.

----- fold here -----

My spotted dog Nugget launches herself onto my bed and laps at my face. The wet streaks she leaves creep and crawl as they dry, the hairs on my face spring to action. I freeze in terror. My German-Aussie Shepherd is a Korean spy. My body is revved by the psychiatric chemical warfare waged in my veins. I am nauseous, my mouth leaking. Beads of sweat break out on my lip. I need as far away from this animal as I can get. I kick her off the bed. Only then does my heart beat slow, my breath squeezing back into my lungs.

----- fold here -----

My spotted dog Nugget launches herself onto my bed and laps at my face. The laziness of this late Sunday morning is pierced by shimmering sun roasting my skin to toast. The birch tree's coin leaves twinkle with light. I drape my arm over her and stroke her barrel ribcage. She exhales a heavy rattling sigh of intimacy. My cheeks swell to draw my lips to a smile. Rest infuses my bones, and I bury my face into her luscious mane. I sniff her feet: she smells of dirty river, mud and fun, white cheddar popcorn, comfort and love.

F o (u) r l o n g m o n t h s

Of anger SWELLS

And knives turned inwards<-----

Plunged

D

E

E

And g P
o hollow
u d
g e

I peel myself from my bed sheets, which have grafted to my skin and bleed as I pick them off, sticky with sweat. I recoil from myself, bones wincing, desperate to escape.

A waiting room clutters me with curling magazines

and a TV playing just beyond recognition

A doctor's office scratches me with crinkling paper bed sheets and plastic pillows

A prescription pad and piercing shadeless light bulb.

Leaves and Steel

Yellow and red are scattered across the streets this morning, and flapping raven wings swell my belly as I crinkle-crush the hardened membranes of the trees' offerings under my feet. My long curly hair catches the tiny fragments of the cracked leaves and I dig them out with frozen fingers, so as not to be caught having rolled around on hard ground with soft flesh.

I am riveted by the musty detritus and salty sweat tingling smells of fall. My lover once laid me down in these leaves, on stolen mornings in the crisp air: our breath hanging dew in the sky, misting our cheeks. Our lips tangle and our teeth knock in our efforts to consume each other, driving chills to my core. The smell of fall(ing) clings to me all day.

I am riveted by the sun flickering off leaves next to the massive steel beams of the bridge. I have stared down hard at the rushing river far below, a familiar teetering on the edge, my hips pressed against the protective railing. I now look up at the never-ending sky and sway, full with the blossoming trees lining the water that has called me before. Something so hard and so soft juxtaposed. Gentle and sharp. Lips and teeth.

Dyke. Girl must be crazy. The words ignite possibilities in my chest and were spat in my face. The silent/screaming tirades of loved ones, of friends no longer friends, coat the ground in rot. And I am riveted to her still, to the leaves that were my home when we didn't have one to go to, when secrets masked spilling joy. Winter teeters on edge above me, yet the sun still reaches my bones.

Each crackle of the earth is a moment of cracking. Each time the river valley is painted in yellow and red I catch myself falling like leaves.

Muscles I didn't know I had clamp down with a vice grip, dragging my limbs along in a twitching and convulsing marathon. I chew aluminum foil. The ravens fill my belly with that

hanging

pause

just before the plummet: a weightless anticipation that sends trickling electricity to the tips of my fingers. Jump. And then the

drop.

Crushing gravity compresses my shoulders - squeezes out the last of my breath - I hit the bottom of the loop - gasp against the weight.

In the middle of the night the street lamps spatter everything in gold dust.

A shadow in the corner of my room flickers and catches my eye.

The stippled ceiling begins to bubble.

I curl up and peer through the slats of my blinds - surveying the streets for invaders.

I shrink inwards and peer out through the slits in my face.

My German shepherd X Australian cattle dog is a Korean spy - surveillance devices implanted in her polka-dotted collar.

I am (in) trouble.

Performative Writing

When writing, Pollock (1998) urges us "to write in excess of norms of scholarly representation, to write beyond textuality... In other words, to make writing perform" (p.79). Much like research-creation recalibrates distinctions between the research act and the creative act, performative writing "collapses distinctions by which creative and critical writing are typically isolated" (Pollock, 1998, p.80). It troubles traditional texts, injecting creativity and play, as well as pointing to the performative nature of writing itself. It also draws us into alternative registers of knowing. "Performative writing evokes worlds that are other-wise intangible, unlocatable: worlds of memory, pleasure, sensation, imagination, affect and in-sight" (Pollock, 1998, p.80). Performative writing, like dance, offers me an opportunity to evoke the unspeakable aspects of madness.

What makes writing performative is not only its aesthetics, but also that the writing must *do* something: it must "perform a social function" (Pollock, 1998, p.76). McRuer (2006) argues that to Crip writing composition (which, arguably, performative writing can do) is to undermine the necessity to compose our writing (and ourselves) normatively. He states: "I argue for the desirability of a loss of composure, since it is only in such a state that heteronormativity might be questioned or resisted and that new (queer/disabled) identities and communities might be imagined" (p.166). I am interested in how performative writing might make (non)sense, shifting our relation to madness and sanity through text (see Price, 2011 for one such text). For example, Pollock (1998) refers "to the often smug tendency to privilege clarity in popular discourses of writing and education (how could anyone with any common sense not be for clarity?)" (p.77). Pollock goes further, citing Giroux, to argue that

'clarity becomes a code word for an approach to writing that is profoundly Eurocentric in both context and content' - writing that conforms to presuppositions about standard language use and neglects the historical, political and cultural specificity of diverse audiences or publics. (p.77)

Borrowing from Pollock and McRuer (2006), I argue that dominant ways of writing in academia are not only Eurocentric, heteronormative, and ableist, but also sanist. Thus, I employ performative writing in the hopes that it be disruptive of the sanist necessity of clarity. I intend to use performative writing (in the context of my work on madness and dance) following Mock (2009), as "an embodied practice that performs its own theory" (p.14). I attempt to theorize Mad by writing Mad. Pollock (1998), while not explicitly engaging with mad politics, nonetheless seems to equate performative writing to numerous mad affects. Pollock argues, for example, that performative writing is "*nervous*. It anxiously crosses various stories, theories, texts, intertexts, and spheres of practice, unable to settle into a clear, linear course, neither willing nor able to stop moving, restless, transient and transitive, traversing spatial and temporal borders" (p.90-91, emphasis in text). The author argues for the non-linear possibilities of performative writing, which resonate with Poole and Ward's (2013) Mad critique of linearity as tied to "modernist assumptions privileg[ing] reason and rational truth" (p.98) (see also Cvetkovich, 2012). Theorizing/writing/exploring the generative possibilities of madness, I would argue, must be done through performative writing to some degree, in order to disrupt the sanist need for clarity and linearity within academia and beyond.

There once was a woman who swallowed a fly
I don't know why she swallowed the fly
Perhaps she'll die
from the anti-epileptics
for the depression
from cutting the meds
due to the seizures
from the anti-psychotics
which required anti-histamines
for the throat swelling
throughout the hypomania
from the wrongly prescribed steroids
for the allergic reaction
from the anti-psychotics
or the hypomania
and the convulsions
from the anti-depressants
for the depression
caused by the lack of serotonin
caused by the childhood trauma
caused by the father complex
caused by the phlegm and liver Qi stagnation
caused by the moral turpitude
caused by the processed foods
caused by the sedentary lifestyle
caused by the poverty

She swallowed the spider to catch the fly
I dunno why she swallowed a fly
Perhaps she'll die

An artist's life manifesto

5. An artist's relation to depression:

- An artist should not be depressed
- Depression is a disease and should be cured
- Depression is not productive for an artist
- Depression is not productive for an artist
- Depression is not productive for an artist

6. An artist's relation to suicide:

- Suicide is a crime against life
- An artist should not commit suicide
- An artist should not commit suicide
- An artist should not commit suicide

Abromovic, 2012

ENDURANCE

This is an endurance piece.

I take my medication. My medication also takes me, sometimes for days/weeks/months at a time.

Celexa

“headache, nausea, dry mouth, sweating, sleepiness or insomnia (sleeping is more likely), constipation or diarrhea (I wish SSRIs would make up their minds about these contradictory side effects), weight gain (if it happens the weight gain can be pretty bad for an SSRI), and assorted sexual dysfunctions . Most everything but the weight gain and bedroom problems usually goes away within a couple of weeks” (crazymeds.us, 2015a).

Clonazepam

“It was the sort of hell one wouldn’t wish on child-molesting telemarketers who ignore the do-not-call list” (crazymeds.us, 2015b).

Lamictal

“Rash, insomnia, itchy skin, lethargy, photosensitivity, memory and cognitive problems, rashes, and headaches that are sometimes really bad. Did I mention rashes and assorted other skin problems?... The lethargy and stupids usually diminish and may even go away” (crazymeds.us, 2015c).

Latuda

“Movement disorders. Movement disorders galore. 20–40% of the people in the clinical trials had some form of movement disorder, mainly akathisia (severe, overwhelming restlessness) and the rate of side effects in clinical trials are *almost always* lower than real life. Nausea and other GI problems are common, but that’s often the case with any med you *really need to take with food*. Putting you to sleep (somnia) and making you feel tired throughout the day (lethargy, sedation) are also common, but Latuda’s an antipsychotic, so what can you expect? Since Latuda is used to treat depression insomnia and anxiety are popular side effects” (crazymeds.us, 2015d).

Risperidal

“The usual: headache, nausea, dry mouth, constipation, sleepiness and lethargy or insomnia and way too much energy. Most everything of these go away within a couple of weeks, although the sleep & lethargy or insomnia & being wired may take a little longer.... Loss of libido, other sexual dysfunctions, swollen breasts, unexpected lactation (it’s especially unexpected when it happens to guys) and all sorts of other stuff related to increased prolactin and other hormonal wackiness... Plus discolored feces, and increased pigmentation” (crazymeds.us, 2014).

Seroquel

“Seroquel is notorious for two things – making you sleep until next Tuesday, and leaving you with one hell of a hangover when you eventually wake up (crazymeds.us, 2013). “Headache, weight gain, nausea, dry mouth, constipation, sleepiness, general lethargy and not giving a damn about anything (emotional blunting). Combine the lethargy and blunting and you get what’s known as zombification... Infanticide - although the *lack* of Seroquel was the real cause of that tragedy” (crazymeds.us, 2015e).

etcetera...

Side effects are a misnomer – they are lived effects.

These drugs sustain me (?), but how long can I sustain them?

<blink> <blink>

"I think crip theory is a collective practice. First of all, I think that it is a practice that has been generated by a lot of queers, in one sense, partly because the workings of compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory able-bodiedness have been so inter-twined for more than a century. And it's really queer crips, crip queers, who have understood those workings really well. And hence, crip theory is this critical cultural practice that has been developed in a lot of queer communities, by artists, activists, and academics, writers of all kinds, poets, painters; many different kinds of cultural workers have put into practice what I think we can call crip theory. That said, I wouldn't say there is an absolute consensus on what crip theory is. I would say that in many ways it is something that's very much about excess. Compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory able-bodiedness generate sites of containment, where disability and queerness are managed, contained, kept quiet, kept silent. And crip cultural production has been about saying, "we're not going to stand for that," so to speak. 'We are going to generate visions of the body and desire and community that are in excess of attempts to contain and manage us.' And there is not absolute consensus about what crip theory is, because that generative excess has been so incredibly varied" (McRuer, quoted in Peers, Brittain & McRuer, 2012, p.148-149). "The world that thought to measure and justify madness through psychology must justify itself before madness, since in its struggles and agonies it measures itself by the excess of the works like those of Nietzsche, of Van Gogh, of Artaud. And nothing in itself, especially not what it can know of madness, assures the world that it is justified by such works of madness" (Foucault, 1965, p.289). "To write in excess of norms of scholarly representation, to write beyond textuality into what might be called social mortalities, to make writing/textuality speak to, of, and through pleasure, possibility, disappearance and even pain" (Pollock, 1998, P.79). "The largely unrecognized intelligence of dreams that many still see as meaningless and nothing but a discharge of excess energy. Madness is often, then, excessive action or difference witnessed by the stage sane" (Harpin, 2014, p.189). "Theatre appears caught in a paradox here between helping to correct 'faulty reasoning' and being dangerous in its potential for an emotional excess that may seize and overtake 'vulnerable' minds" (Harpin & Foster, 2014, p.11). "He currently feels in despair. Hopeless. No will to live. Sleeping excessively. Withdrawn. Tears and sadness, although the tears have reduced on the Effexor. He feels each day is another one to get through. His concentration is off, and his memory is poor. He is working as an actor, and coping with that" (Tighe, 2014, p.111). "The heroine is a madwoman possessed by a god or spirit or is frenzied with excessive emotions, she often carries a branch of bamboo as a sign of her disturbed state of mind" (Ishii, 1994, p.54-55). "Building on the excesses associated with larger-than-life musical form, singing and dancing about the ideas and emotions rather than merely feeling, speaking about, or suggesting them, the decision to turn Joy's depression symptoms into full-blown characters with whom she interacted meant that depression was not merely discussed or embodied by a solitary depressed character, but rather was hyper-embodied beyond her individual experience" (Johnston, 2010, p.210). "Weeping and lamenting, she succumbs to excessive grief" (Ishii, 1994, p.62). "The primary symptom of BDD is 'excessive' anxiety about appearance. What makes it 'excessive'? Basically if it makes you very distressed or interferes with your normal work or social 'functioning.' But adequate 'functioning' depends on your context—your class status, your work life, other people's expectations of you, how much you expect of yourself, and so on. And how much distress about your physical flaws is too much? These are very subjective criteria, and the diagnosis is always going to be both contextual and strategic" (Heyes & Taylor, 2010, p.181). "A woman who becomes mad through an excessive desire for vengeance directed at her husband, who has left her for another woman" (Ishii, 1994, p.62). "In today's global capitalist order manic traits such as drives to be productive are highly valued. But in the popular cultural imaginary this condition's 'excesses' are feared" (Chouinard, 2012, p.145). "By deliberately foregrounding and bringing together two extremes, two excesses, embodied by the classical ballet body and the disabled body, Newson forces the viewer to confront perfection and imperfection, those who cannot pretend and those who do not fit in" (Whatley, 2010, p.47). "A woman's touch was believed capable of debilitating and destabilizing men's bodies and minds...Contemporary physiological theories... held that an excessive loss of semen led to physical and mental degeneration - as well as blindness - in men" (Classen, 2005, p.71). "Fatness signified surrender of the disabled child's self to excessive appetites that could be restrained only through greater control of the already incapacitated body" (Rice, 2010, p.167). "Participants generally described mental illness in terms of depression, sadness, insecurity, hopelessness, or failure and avoidance of social interactions. Other indications of mental health struggles included domestic violence or aggressive behavior, alcohol or drug use, straying from religion, losing interest in work, and excessive sleep" (Simich, Maiter, Moorlag, & Ochocka, 2009, p.211). "Return Ophelia to childhood and thereby overlook the disruptive potential of her unconfined, wandering excess" (Harpin & Foster, 2014, p.13). "Art in the natural world occurs as excess" (Conrad & Beck, 2015).

When reading this, do you experience the following:

- A. A distinct period of abnormally and persistently elevated, expansive, or irritable mood and abnormally and persistently increased activity or energy...
- B. During the period of mood disturbance and increased energy and activity, three (or more) of the following symptoms (four if the mood is only irritable) have persisted, represent a noticeable change from usual behavior, and have been present to a significant degree:
 1. Inflated self-esteem or grandiosity.
 2. Decreased need for sleep (e.g., feels rested after only 3 hours of sleep).
 3. More talkative than usual or pressure to keep talking.
 4. Flight of ideas or subjective experience that thoughts are racing.
 5. Distractability (i.e., attention too easily drawn to unimportant or irrelevant external stimuli)...
 6. Increase in goal-directed activity... or psychomotor agitation.
 7. Excessive involvement in activities that have a high potential for painful consequences... (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p.124)

Specify if:

With anxious distress:...

1. Feeling keyed up or tense.
2. Feeling unusually restless.
3. Difficulty concentrating because of worry.
4. Fear that something awful may happen.
5. Feeling that the individual might lose control of himself or herself.

Specify current severity:

Mild: Two symptoms.

Moderate: Three symptoms.

Severe: Four or five symptoms with motor agitation. (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p.149)

I find my father dead. Naked, cold, blue. Legs draped over the side of the bed, hand clutching heart, eyes wide open. Rigor Mortis. He pissed himself, and his flaccid penis is exposed. I jump on the bed and shake him. Scream. Call 911. I wait. Will this tightness in my chest leave with a few deep breaths? I get up, cloak his body in his ratty terrycloth bathrobe.

I find myself in my father's living room. The carpet is loud against my feet. The coffee table has razor sharp edges. I am nauseous. Hazy. My throat swelling and in a vice. The insides of my forearms and the backs of my knees are dangerously weak with uncertainty. I am coursing, raging, rushing with adrenaline and fear, shock and loss. Overcome with an all-consuming urge. I must move. I explode and collapse into dance.

Alone. Snot runs down my face, mixing with tears and guttural moans. I shake and jerk violently: jumping, over-extending, jamming my knees, hips, elbows, shoulders, ribs for lack of "proper" technique. I run into things. I stumble and trip. I break. I am naked. Conscious. Self-conscious. Judging my movements uncoordinated, sloppy, ridiculous, embarrassing. Then sights and sounds lapse and then fall away. All I sense is the weight of my body, the rolling intensity of grief spread through my chest. I revel in what I had judged ugly. I want to be disjointed, unformed, messy, hurting, mad.¹

¹ An earlier version of this paragraph has been published in Avner et al. (2014)

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