

Dangerous Reciprocity:

Creating a Madness Narrative

Research Methodology

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In this article I examine the nature of reciprocity and representation when mental illness is associated with the researcher and/or participant. Reciprocity has been a central concept of activist research methodology, which explores how academic knowledge can be used in the public sphere. Ellen Cushman defines reciprocity as “an open and conscious negotiation of the power structures reproduced during the give-and-take interactions of the people involved on both sides of the relationship” (16). Reciprocity can take the form of sharing the final write-up with participants, inviting participants into the composing of the write-up itself, and writing for and with participants on community-rather than academically-focused projects. These facets of reciprocity are particularly attuned to the civic turn of rhetoric and composition, such as that seen in John Ackerman’s and David Coogan’s edited collection, *The Public Work of Rhetoric*. For example, in “Sophists for Social Change,” Coogan describes his experience partnering with teens to organize

a booklet describing a city community in order to promote a teen center. The civically-oriented, activist nature of reciprocity links it to the public sphere through its concern for research participants.

This publically-oriented reciprocal research methodology is important not only to activist research but also to feminist and disability studies, particularly when it comes to the issue of representation of the mentally ill. Representation intersects the public nature of reciprocal research because how the identity of the mentally ill is rhetorically constructed through research is an ethical issue that can have material consequences on research participants.¹ For example, Pamela Fisher and Dawn Freshwater write it is important to examine how mental health “categories, which label and objectify individuals, are constituted within discursive practices” that affect such things as health care access and treatment (199). And it is the issue of the representation of mental illness that I want to address in this article. Methodologically, mental illness should be represented through a reciprocal relationship with the participant.

Reciprocal representation can be an intersubjective encounter between researcher and participant because representation not only refers to how participants are presented but also how the researcher is presented. As Cushman states, it is the “give-and-take interactions of the people involved on *both* sides of the relationship” that defines reciprocity (16 emphasis added). In fact, Katrina Powell and Pamela Takayoshi argue that practitioners of ethical reciprocity should be cognizant of the roles participants want *the researchers* to adopt. When both groups are co-participants and co-creators of the research, then the traditional roles of researchers and participants change (398). Therefore, reciprocity asks not only how the research affects the participant but also how it affects the researcher. In the narrative I present here, reciprocity refers to how mental illness affects the data collection and write-up process, how those with mental illness are represented (including both researcher and participant), and how the research itself affects those with mental illness.

1 Even using the term “mentally *ill*,” of course, is a representation implying a lack of health leading to non-normative, irrational behavior. Nevertheless, I have chosen to use this term not to re-enforce such a medicalized model of deficiency but in order to juxtapose it later in the article against the term “madness,” which challenges normative notions of mental “illness.”

Mental illness can be characterized as abnormal detachment from reality. Fisher and Freshwater argue that the narratives of medicine deny those with mental illness “epistemic authority” because their experience diverges from rational experience (202). Jennifer Radden writes, “Mental disorder has been allied with otherness, with irrationality, lack of competence, deficient agency, identity and even humanity” (2). With such a focus on positivist rationality, research representations of the mentally ill can appropriate a rhetoric of deficiency. In this paradigm, the experiences of the mentally ill have no value or are silenced. Radden writes, “Psychotic episodes are at most opportunity costs in a more functional life trajectory, and are no more meaningful than a bad dream” (5).

Skepticism over the rational reliability of the experiences of the mentally ill is akin to the skepticism over the rational reliability of a researcher with a mental illness or the rational reliability of participants with mental illnesses because the medicalization of mental illness is characterized as something to be fixed. Methodologically, this raises the issue of representation: How should the experiences of mentally ill participants and researchers be represented in the research write-up? How can the write-up, researcher, and participants be considered epistemologically reliable and thus credible to produce knowledge?

The concept of the “madness narrative” serves as a way to address some of the methodological tensions between representing research that intersects mental illness. In order to counter the identities and experiences established through a medicalized “master narrative” of mental illness, Radden uses the term “madness narrative.” Fisher and Freshwater argue for the importance of this type of narrative: “We believe that narrative can offer a way forward by prompting a form of ‘decolonization’ [of medical knowledge] through the telling and construction of stories, whereby people with mental health represent themselves rather than being spoken for” (202). Radden notes these narratives, which are produced *by* the mentally ill, often takes the form of resistance writing to identities established for them through medicalization (4). Margaret Price examines disability autobiographies, which she notes draws from feminist, queer, and post-colonial theorists because, Price argues, they “have been asking for quite some time how various representations of the subaltern

might speak” (16). Similar to Radden and Fisher and Freshwater, Price sees a confrontational engagement with dominant ideology as part of madness narratives: “The counter-diagnostic story does not merely parallel or replace the conventional diagnostic story: it ruins it altogether, attacks its foundations, queers it” (17). Price notes these narratives embrace a “creative incoherence” that expresses non-rational experience and thought as a way of knowing. Thus, representing the self that becomes a “strategic advantage rather than accommodated as impairment” (18-19). In madness narratives, therefore, representations of the self can be fragmented, conflicting, multiple, resistant, poly-vocal, multi-genred, and permissively non-rational.

I am proposing that the madness narrative can also be a methodology that attempts to achieve the goals of ethical representation and reciprocity integral to feminist and disability studies, particularly when dealing with participants—and researchers—with mental illnesses. By adopting a methodology of the madness narrative, researchers can open up areas of possibility into understanding the world in non-rational ways through alternative ways of representation that can be contradictory, poly-vocal, multi-genred, and resistant to traditional research findings. Methodologically, researchers can allow such multi-faceted identities and perspectives to be a strength of the research rather than a deficiency. When the madness narrative is heard in an epistemological framework beyond normative rationality, other forms of knowing become open from the realm of the subaltern of the mentally ill. Representations and experiences of the mentally ill become valid sources of knowledge that promote multiple understandings of the data, researcher, participant, and the research process itself.

This article takes the form of a madness narrative to address methodological issues in a way not accessible through traditional research write-ups. The madness narrative as a methodology allows researchers and participants to represent themselves and their knowledge and experiences through a concept I call “dangerous reciprocity.” Dangerous reciprocity is an intersubjective encounter that embraces the unpredictable epistemologies of the “mad” to create representations of the mentally ill that challenge medicalized

paradigms that see mental illness as a deficiency that cannot produce valid knowledge. In the madness narrative that follows, I describe my own experience with mental illness and how that interacted with a research participant who most likely also had a mental illness. The madness narrative shifts in tone, direction, style, and focus in order to perform a form of Price's "creative incoherence." The narrative is ultimately *my* story; however, I have tried to represent my participant's contribution to that story through dangerous reciprocity as well as my resistance to those efforts.

The events that I describe in this article took place as I was researching a larger project on materiality, memory, and how "the dead" of war are rhetorically constructed in the space of cemeteries. My engagement in the space of the cemetery interacted with the actions of the other participant whom I interviewed in the cemetery, and as a result, the reciprocal sharing of our experiences contributed to both of our alternative understanding of the space of the cemetery. My experiences with madness in the cemetery contributed to my understanding of my ongoing research about the nature of space: space also functions in ways beyond the rational; it evokes strong experiential reactions within people—in multiple, contradictory, and charged ways—that intersubjectively engage the experiences of others in the space. An approach based in rational epistemology to writing up our experience would not allow me to report this knowledge to you because it would not be considered knowledge in the first place. A madness narrative methodology, therefore, allows me to construct the knowledge derived from both of our mad experiences in a way that does not follow a linear, argument-driven progression that seeks rational conclusions.

"You're the man I've been looking for," I said to him first thing. This would be the wrong thing to say to a man who saw no coincidences in the world.

I was in the cemetery doing research on memory and monuments, and I had been trying to find the person who put up flags on the graves of wartime soldiers.

Tall, muscular, with gray hair and a straw hat, he stared at me with gleaming blue eyes as he finished hammering a flag into the ground. He replied to me first thing, “I have not been diagnosed with a psychological disorder.”

I was excited and energized because I had been doing research in the cemetery for months, describing the activities of visitors and recording the inscriptions on the various grave stones and monuments. Most people passed through the cemetery, merely gazing and photographing monuments as they drove by in their out-of-state cars. Their participation was, in my mind, passive and left no material mark on the cemetery. There were others, however, who brought offerings, left messages, and held ceremonies in the space, and these were the cemetery participants I was after for my study. But these people were elusive.

By spending so much time in the cemetery, whose name and description I have purposely not given, I felt like I, too, was an active member of the community of the living *and* dead, making the activity of “participant observation” a reality. As I rubbed inscriptions in crayon with my knees in the grass, I felt like I was keeping these soldiers, many who died around my own age, company. I wondered what it was like to fight for a cause during war, and I wondered what it was like to be in battle: the fear, the death.

To meet this flag man in the cemetery, therefore, was to meet someone to interview for my research, but it was also to meet a kindred spirit, a fellow active participant. Considering myself a participant along with the dead affected what I would learn in the study.

“The dead here speak to me,” the flag man said. His words blazed in fire in my mind the way they sometimes do when I am interviewing or reading something and know, right then, that it is an important passage. Here was someone from the living who was interacting with the dead, just like me. He said the dead started to speak one day after his divorce when he put a gun to his head to kill himself. The voices of the dead told him not to. The fact that he literally *heard* voices was an irrelevant detail. Was there really much difference between that

and the voices I metaphorically heard? Were they both not equally as real?

I asked if I could interview him. He was afraid I was with the FBI. No, just doing research, an idea that excited him because he saw himself as a guide of the cemetery.

“I tell the story. I do the narrative,” he said.

He regularly came to the cemetery to sit, read, put up flags, and talk to visitors about the cemetery’s history. The flag man was moved by the amount of dead soldiers from wars. In light of such numbers, he viewed his actions in the cemetery as a type of “spiritual tribute” to the dead. He showed me what he showed all visitors who came to talk to him: a wooden box he called the “Ossuary,” which sat on an altar-like table.

“Here is a lot of unnecessary death,” he said as he waved his hand around his head, pointing to the gravestones. “Men died before their time. It shows the sheer horror that man does to himself.”

He was particularly drawn to the graves of unidentified soldiers, some of whom have stones, while others are marked by the empty grass. “The ‘unknown’ part freaks me out,” he said fervently.

He recorded my name in a journal, where he kept a record of all his interactions with people in the cemetery. The flag man was desperate not to have his actions be forgotten, as he feared may be the case for the dead soldiers. As a result, he built replicas of his Ossuary, material memory boxes of his experiences. “It’s all about projected history—these boxes will far transcend me,” he said.

He called himself member of the “Sentinel of the Dead,” someone who kept watch over the soldiers. He understood the importance of witnessing, of having someone to listen and retell the story. He saw himself as a spiritual transmitter of the dead. Once, he asked the dead to show him what war was like, just as I had wondered myself. He held his hands on a monument for twenty minutes to see the horror

of war. “I don’t need to do that again,” he said as he stared straight at me with fire eyes. “I now *know*.”

I wrote up my experience. I described my engagement with the cemetery and compared it to that of the flag man. We were both witnesses to the life of the soldiers, embodied participants in the creation of memory. Through us, the dead *were* alive, dwelling in the space of our co-presence in the cemetery.

The experience and the writing of my experience blazed in my mind. The cemetery was a space charged with energy—past, present, and even future layered upon one another. It was a powerful, cosmic even. To go to the space of the cemetery was to be in a constant *kairotic* moment where I and the flag man and the dead were all united in time as members of the same community.

It wasn’t until three years after the interview, with the new-found diagnosis of bipolar disorder, did I name that I was in the middle of a manic episode when I met the flag man and wrote up my experience.

Being bipolar reminds me of the story of Icarus and the trope of burning and fire associated with mania. Icarus is focused and driven—so smart and with enough hubris to think he can fly with carefully crafted feathers and wax. And he *does*. At first his wings take him up, and he soars on the wind currents. Higher and higher. He can see the city, the shore, the ocean stretching out into nothing. Exhilaration and wonderment. He possesses it all and has a greater understanding of the world than those merely on the ground. He’s now part of the heavens more than earth.

To be manic is to be Icarus with his wings.

Higher and higher.

But Icarus keeps going higher towards where the sun blazes with fire. The sun burns Icarus and melts his wings. He feels his stomach

in his throat as he free falls, the land and the sea spinning beyond orientation while he is in a state of paralyzing anxiety.

Then, depression: he crashes on the rocks in the sea. Alone, exhausted, broken, perhaps lifeless, Icarus lays there.

And the waves slam the rocks relentlessly, over and over.

When manic, for me everything blazes in a heightened state of reality. Everything crystalizes, clarifies, becomes lucid. (In medicalized terminology, manic states are associated with “delusions of grandeur,” a phrase with which I never identified because I felt I actually *am* that awesome—no delusion there.) To be manic is to be in a constant *kairotic* moment: events culminate with certain inevitability and realization.

The bright manic blaze of the events in the cemetery blinded me to what were warning signs surrounding the experience. The flag man heard voices. He owned an “arsenal” of guns. He was ex-military and an ex-funeral home worker. He vaguely alluded to a violent past and using the Internet to track people down. While all true, I cringe to put them all together in the above fashion because it characterizes him as a crazed murderer from something like *Criminal Minds* and creates a one-dimensional representation of madness. Nevertheless, all of these details became significant after I sent him my write-up of the research, an action I performed as an act of reciprocity with my research participant. I wanted to reveal how I had represented the flag man but also *share* with him my findings so that my experience with the cemetery could enrich his own, just as his had mine.

The flag man didn’t use email, so I sent him a copy of my paper through the mail, including my return mailing address in case he wanted to respond. After I sent the flag man my paper, I received an articulate thank you letter, penned in magnificently detailed script. He said he put my writing in the Ossuary, calling it the defining text

of his actions in the cemetery. He also said the soldier boys in the cemetery liked my writing.

Then, I received another letter, and the tone shifted. It was slightly sexually suggestive.

I did not respond.

The letters kept coming in remarkably in different handwriting and writing styles. They were aggressive, personal, ranting, circuitous, and prophetic. He wrote he would teach me things that I could not learn at the university. The letters contained drawings, quotations, photographs, stories, commentary. I wish I could include some of the striking passages and images. As literary artifacts they are electric. I do not, however, have permission to do so, nor am I willing to try to get it: the letters started to include thinly-veiled threats, such as the suggestion that we don't appreciate safety until it's gone and that I could love or hate him but that he would always have my attention.

Even though I am not able to provide specifics of the letters, let me list some of the actions that the letters prompted me to do. I changed cars. I seriously scanned the area whenever I went out. I consulted a domestic violence campus organization. Added locks to the door. Sought out the possibility of a restraining order. Bought a gun.

But the letters exist in performative silence. They cannot be revealed. They resist representation.

Meanwhile, Icarus was falling. Encompassing anxiety replaced manic energy. I felt a terrorizing panic.

For the first time ever, I feared for my life. It was a brief taste of what the soldier boys in the cemetery had experienced in war. I was acquiring a new type of knowledge. Just as my research write-up had

defined the flag man's engagement with the cemetery, so his letters were defining mine: a dangerous reciprocity.

Gesa Kirsch discusses the dangers of confusing friendliness between researchers and participants as actual friendship. In this situation, she writes, "the potential dangers of misunderstandings, betrayed trust, and alienation loom large" (2167). However, Powell and Takayoshi problematize the role of researcher and participant, noting that in reciprocal research relationships, participants may have in mind different roles for researcher and participant than those associated with traditional positivistic research (398). In such a model, what happens when the participant does desire friendship—or some other role not associated with traditional research? The danger, then, is not always in the betrayal of the relationship but in the potential acceptance of that role. More methodological preparation of the kind Kirsch advises could have potentially helped me clarify the relationship between me, the researcher, and the flag man, the participant. But a madness methodology blurs those lines of researcher and participant in unpredictable ways.

More methodological preparation could not account for the fact that I was in a manic episode at the same time that the participant heard voices. At another time in a non-manic state, I would probably have seen some of the flag man's statements as warning signs of potential violent behavior. But while manic, our interview blazed with heightened significance: we were on a similar plane of madness, open to listening to what the dead might communicate. Kirsch goes on to state, "As researchers, we need to develop realistic expectations about our interactions with participants, recognizing that they are shaped, like all human interactions, by dynamics of power, gender, generation, education, race, class, and many other factors that can contribute to feelings of misunderstanding, disappointment, and broken trust" (2170). To these factors, we can add mental illness.

My interactions with the flag man happened when I was manic, and that state radically altered how I perceived my experience in the cemetery. The person I interviewed most likely also had a

mental illness, and that affected how he perceived the cemetery and our encounter in it. I hesitate to relate anything that the flag man did—hearing voices, writing threatening letters—because I know it contributes to the association of mental illness with deranged criminality, something that makes me cringe every time I hear about someone on the news who was taking “psychotropic drugs” such as Prozac going on a killing spree. More importantly, though, I worry about how I represent *him*, the flag man—not the generalized concept of mental illness. On making negative assessments of research participants, Thomas Newkirk states, “Even though the negative might be balanced by the positive, and even though we have carefully disguised the identity of the person we render, we (and often the subject) feel as if a trust has been betrayed. And it often has” (3). How can I represent our story and yet not negate it? How can I write about this encounter with madness without betrayal?

Throughout this piece I have struggled on what details to keep and exclude to represent myself as sane—or at least saner than the flag man. As Fisher and Freshwater write, “Editorial decisions on the part of the narrator on what to include, what to exclude and how to assign meaning necessarily entail a certain responsibility” (203). I want to impose a “narrative order” to create “templates of meaning” (Fisher and Freshwater 203). But I also feel the need to confess that I, too, once wrote such an emotionally charged crazy letter that it made someone feel unsafe, even though that was never my intention. Additionally, part of this article was written while manic—should I disclose which part? I want to represent myself as different from the flag man. Even as I resist the positivist paradigm, I really want to seem saner than him so that my narrative will have academic credibility. *I* am the one to be believed.

But I also fear that the flag man and I are not that different, that what is deficiency in him is also deficiency in me. His story is my story.

A madness narrative, however, would not see our irrational epistemology as deficiency. Rather, a madness narrative can make representations of the incomprehensible generative. We can write about encounters of madness through dangerous reciprocity, which takes risks, resists conclusions, embraces unpredictability, and accepts

alternative ways of knowing made possible through the irrational encounters between researchers and participants. This madness sometimes resists commentary or has no path to follow or expect. Dangerous reciprocity is radical openness to the ways in which the process of research affects the researcher. The risks we take with reciprocity can go much farther than inadvertent betrayal of participant trust or misrepresentation via positivist epistemologies; dangerous reciprocity can place the researcher in the state of utmost vulnerability, leaving the participant to negotiate the direction of not only the research, but the relationship.

Additionally, a madness narrative methodology is performative and extends an invitation of dangerous reciprocity to the reader to become “mad” too through the reading of the text. In this manner, dangerous reciprocity is also public activism: it overtly engages the narratives and representations of mental illness, recognizing such engagement has public, material consequences, both for the care of the mentally ill and the creation of knowledge.

If I did it again, would I change what I did next? Yes.

Yet, do I regret what happened? No.

I received letters sporadically for many months.

I was advised to give no response; that would only further escalate the situation. I avoided going to the cemetery, but on the few occasions I went, I saw new flags from the flag man. I felt as if we were engaged in our own tribal war over the cemetery. He stated that the dead were sending special messages through me and my writing. Everything that had happened thus far, he wrote, was for supernatural purposes beyond the mere world of the living. I and the flag man and the cemetery were all connected in some form of radical intersubjectivity made possible through writing, my writing and his writing.

Then the letters changed in tone, and he begged that I return to the cemetery. The flag man said that he had made me a wooden box—my own ossuary. He emphasized that the box was a gift from the dead as thanks for my writing.

The flag man and I were involved in the same story, but that story needed to end. I was tired being on the defensive, waiting to receive another disturbing letter to see what the voices in the flag man's head were telling him to do next.

So, against advice, I decided to meet the flag man in the cemetery to receive my box and to tell him to stop writing me. Meeting again in the cemetery seemed the logical/illogical inevitable conclusion to the elevated experience. The sane who gave me advice did not understand the insane logic that the flag man and I shared. To meet again was inevitable, orchestrated, and parallel to our first meeting. It was the unescapable completion of our madness narrative. For him to stop writing me letters, we had to talk again in the cemetery.

When I arrive at the cemetery, the flag man is dressed in a suit with black sunglasses. In a surreal twist, he has somehow met a tour group of school children, and he is explaining a monument to them. I already knew there would be no way to predict what would happen at this meeting, but I am hoping that we can clear up some misunderstandings and leave on good terms.

I park and wait for him. Unlike him, I leave my sunglasses in the car; I'm here to look him straight in the eye.

He comes over with a purposeful stride, shakes my hand, and says, "Step into my office." He motions to the space in front of one of the monuments.

I explain that I think we've had a misunderstanding—that we are not as close as he thinks and that I find his letters threatening. He is excited and fidgets, unable to contain his energy. We end up circling

one another and pacing back and forth as if in a cage fight. He is not truly listening, just biding his time to say his piece.

“Follow me,” he demands. We step over next to his car. “Those letters were carefully crafted. If you take them to a lawyer, you’ll have no case,” he says adamantly while pointing at me. (Legally, you have to receive a direct, specific threat in order to take action. Suggestions do not count, and he knew that.)

There are no coincidences, he explains, so it makes perfect sense that I came today.

He gets out a briefcase from his car and sets it on the hood. When he opens it to take out his journal, I can see that there is also a pistol with a silencer inside.

Suddenly the encounter takes on an even more surreal quality. I feel as if we are enacting a bizarre, rehearsed ritual as if we are in a play. The flag man is waving his arms and reading from his journal. I am in a surreal state of meta-awareness where I am calmly thinking about what I am thinking. If he shoots me, I think, I’ll die with the soldier boys. I remember a quotation from soldiers who survived war. They asked, “Did it not seem real?”

There’s no running away; that will probably get me shot quicker, I think. I wonder if he is trying to usher me into his idea of spiritual awareness by putting a barrel to my head, as he did when he was about to kill himself.

But the gun stays in the now-closed briefcase.

“You have a lot of talent as a writer, but I’m helping you become better,” he says. “One day you’re going to be on the best seller list, and you’ll see how I helped you.”

He says he is making me experience the “real world” outside of the university, but his ranting feels like theatre and his gun a prop in a cliché briefcase.

He is totally aware, as am I, of what he is doing, for he wants me to write about this event. Through his spectacular theatrics, he is insisting that I tell his narrative and his perspective of the cemetery for him.

He pauses and stares directly at me. “What section are you on?”

I know exactly what he means: the sections of the article about the cemetery, the article that I am currently writing. Even as the event is happening, I know I will finish my article with this encounter with the flag man, and he knows it too. We are in the *kairotic* moment in a shared *kairotic* space.

But I pretend I don’t know what he’s talking about. I do not acknowledge that even at this moment I am writing it in my head. I refuse to admit to him how reciprocal our experience of the cemetery has become, to admit that he is a co-author of the currently unfolding text.

The flag man goes back to his car and pulls out a black trash bag.

The wooden box is inside, the ossuary he has promised.

He uncovers it and sets it on the bench.

Now he takes off his sunglasses, and his blue eyes blaze at me. “This is yours to keep forever. Don’t throw it away, burn it, give it away, sell it, paint it—and *don’t* let people sit on it.”

If I keep the box, I will always remember him.

He continues into another rant, but I pick up the box.

“Thank you,” I say.

We shake hands.

Prompted by the intensively ritualized and cosmic nature of this engagement, the words of the Episcopal literary from growing up comes back to me as a way to conclude our encounter. “May the peace of God which surpasses all understanding keep your heart and mind,” I say.

“God doesn’t bring peace.”

To dwell in the space of a madness narrative is to dwell with no conclusion.

We never spoke again.

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