

A Mad Feminist Dialogue for a Mad Archive: “Mad Feminist Activism in the Global Feminist Movement: A Dialogue on and of Dissent”

This event was part of the 7th Biennial Seneca Falls Dialogues, hosted by the Women's Institute for Leadership and Learning. The dialogue brought together mad activists and scholars to discuss old and new directions in mad feminist activism and to consider mad activism's role in a larger feminist agenda. It will also touched on the rights and positionality of women, Black and Indigenous People of Color, and LGBTQ+ folk living with psychiatric labels or who have had psychiatric experiences, and those fighting for their rights from unique locations within larger social justice efforts. The dialogue considered non-normative activism and elicited discourse on what mad feminist activism has been and is becoming, considering the ways that mad feminist activism has dealt with and deals with identity, erased histories, and contested activist and advocacy tendencies and trajectories. By exchanging ideas and sharing experiences on mad feminist activism, our hope was that our dialogue would serve as a moment of mad grassroots organizing.

Dialogue Panelists:

Toby Glade (They/Them)

Professorial Lecturer

Delphine Brody (She/Her)

Co-Founder of Trans and Non-Binary Housing Collective

Allilsa Fernandez (She/He/They)

Community Activist and Executive Director at Inspirational Mental Health

Vesper Moore (They/Them)

Mad Activist, Community Activist, and Director at Kiva Centers

Maria Rovito (She/Her)

PhD Candidate in American Studies and Instructor of Disability Studies and American Literature

Moderator/Facilitator:

Jessica Lowell Mason (She/Her/They)

PhD Student and TA in Global Gender and Sexuality Studies at the University at Buffalo

Questions from the Moderator for a Dialogue about Mad Feminist Activism: A Guide for Conversation by Jessica Lowell Mason, Moderator

What do you think about the relationship or intersection between feminism and madness? How do you personally think about the two in relationship with one another - do you compartmentalize them, see them as inherently connected, or see them as having a specific relationship?

Has the mad pride movement and mad activism been a form of feminist activism, is mad activism feminist activism, necessarily? In what ways has mad activism and the mad movement been a feminist movement and in what ways has it been otherwise?

How do feminist movements and the mad movement collaborate toward similar or distinct goals? What do you think the relationship between feminist activism and mad activism will or should be in the future -- what kinds of efforts are happening now that are paving the way to a future in which they are collaborative or part of one another?

How can mad activism contribute to larger global feminist movements? How has it contributed in the past, in the present, and the future?

What is “mad feminist activism” and how does it differ from feminist activism or mad activism, if at all?

Why is mad feminist activism important and what kinds of social, systemic, and institutional changes, efforts, and movements can it participate in?

Do you consider yourself a mad feminist activist? What does the identity category mean to you?

What organizations and projects exist that are participating mad feminist activism?

Is mad feminist activism a global activism? How is it a global form of activism?

Why do we need mad feminist activism? Who has benefited, and who will benefit?

What are problems in the mad movement and in the mad activism community today, and how do or can feminist approaches respond to these problems?

How is mad feminist activism transgressive? What are the risks involved in engaging in this kind of activism? What forms does the activism take? What does it look like in action?

How is mad feminist activism different than other kinds of activism or feminist activism-- what happens when madness is brought into feminist initiatives, agendas, and actions?

How can mad feminist activism participate in decolonizing efforts, and what are the material and immaterial forms and implications of such participation? How do we decolonize mad activism, feminist activism, and mad feminist activism?

How are housing and others social justice issues addressed by mad feminist activism? How do you encounter and address each in your activist and/or scholarly work, or lives, or in the organizations in which you participate?

How does mad feminist activism require or help us to question the past: what parts or aspects of the past does it require or help us to confront? What parts of mad activism in the past does feminism help us to question or confront? What parts of feminist activism in the past does mad activism help us to question or confront?

How does mad feminist activism disrupt the present? How does it disrupt the present and its conceptions about reality, its accepted norms, its determinations of who matters and who does not, its expectations, its values, and its injustices?

How can mad feminist activism build a better future? What are future directions in mad feminist activism-- what is on the hopeful or dystopic horizon?

What are the struggles involved in and challenges of doing mad feminist activism?

What is most important for mad feminist activism to focus on at the current moment? What is most urgently in need of attention by mad feminist activism?

What kind of work do you do that you consider mad feminist activism?

How long have you been part of mad activism, feminist activism, or mad feminist activism? How did you come to participate in this form of social justice activism?

What has, does, and will mad feminist activist leadership? Are there leaders? How do organizers organize? How is contestation and disagreement uniquely part of mad feminist activism?

What kinds of things would you like to see mad feminist activism accomplish?

How is mad feminist activism positioned in relation to disability justice? Is it part of disability justice? Is disability justice part of it? Are they forms of one another?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sXAnrTUJLA8>

The Mad Feminist Dialogue: A Transcript

Jessica Lowell Mason

Okay, we're recording, so good morning, Everyone.

Welcome to "Mad Feminist Activism in the Global Feminist Movement: A Dialogue on and of Dissent." I want to express my sincere gratitude to our panelists for their work and to everyone gathered here today for recognizing the value of having a dialogue on this subject as well as to thank the Seneca Falls Dialogues for accepting this mad feminist dialogue for inclusion at the 2020 conference, as it is such an important time for us to gather in dialogue. It is encouraging to know that so many people feel the importance and urgency of this panel's subject or were inclined to join out of curiosity.

My name is Jessica Lowell Mason. I'm a graduate student in Global Gender and Sexuality Studies Department at the University at Buffalo, a co-founder of the feminist mental health and madness literacy organization, Madwomen in the Attic, a psychiatric survivor, and a lesbian mother of two daughters. I am honored to be moderating this dialogue today, and to have my daughters present with me while I do it.

Last January, prior to the global pandemic, I received a call for proposals from my graduate department – it was from the Seneca Falls Dialogues. I was unfamiliar with the dialogues but was struck by the idea of a feminist gathering of some sort that did not call itself a conference. The word “dialogue” signaled, to me, something outside of the academic status quo, and this, combined with the conference’s focus on bringing together community activists and academics to be in dialogue with one another and with a larger community, is what prompted me to submit a proposal for a mad feminist dialogue.

The conference’s theme, “Disrupting the Past, Questioning the Present, and Building the Future” provides direction for this dialogue, which aims to bring together mad activists and scholars to discuss old and new directions in mad feminist activism and to consider mad activism’s role in a larger feminist agenda. Our dialogue will consider the problems within, problems facing, and implications of mad feminist activism in the way that addresses rights and responsibilities with regard to oppression and oppressed communities, including Black and Indigenous People of Color and LGBTQ+ folk living with psychiatric labels or who have had psychiatric experiences.

By exchanging ideas and sharing experiences on mad feminist activism, it is my hope that this dialogue will serve as a moment of mad grassroots organizing. So, if you go to the bottom of the screen, there is a chat feature, toward the middle of the bottom of the Zoom screen. If you click on that, to the right, there is a - are - two links that I put up, and we have two Google documents that we are sharing with everyone that is present at this dialogue today as a way of offering an alternative and maybe more expansive and flexible space for engaging in the dialogue. One of the documents includes questions I have posed to help give direction and shape to the dialogue. The other is a notepad where we invite all attendees to engage in the dialogue by sharing thoughts, questions, impressions, and responses. So if you are not comfortable or for any other reason do not want to pose a question during this moment but want to pose a question in the dialogue in general, please feel welcome to use the Google Docs to do that or to share thoughts there, as well.

Together, we will consider what mad feminist activism has been and is becoming, the ways that mad feminist activism deals with social injustice and oppression, identity, erased histories, and contested activist and advocacy tendencies and trajectories. By exchanging ideas and sharing experiences on mad feminist activism, it is my hope that this dialogue will serve as a moment of mad grassroots organizing.

Our brilliant and wonderful dialogue presenters are Vesper Moore, Toby Glade, Allilsa Fernandez, Delphine Brody, Connor Walters, and Maria Rovito. They all have worked very hard in planning this and have contributed so importantly to this dialogue, and I am so grateful that we are here together and excited to listen to what each of you has to say today. Our panelists are going to introduce themselves and will spend a few minutes responding to the subject of the dialogue. After each panelist speaks, we will move into an open dialogue with everyone who is here. And now I would please invite you to give your attention to our first speaker, Vesper Moore.

Vesper Moore

Thank you, Jessica, for that wonderful introduction. So, my name is Vesper Moore. I use They/Them pronouns. I am a mad activist and community activist largely, a psychiatric survivor, and identify as a mad Indigenous Queer person. Just to start off today, the way in which I envision mad activism in the global feminist movement is when you think about every social justice movement that is currently out there, and their ideologies around what is, you know, madness and survivorship, and what we understand as common human experiences within mad activism, they are often referring to as mental illness. In truth, mental illness, being something that does not actually have biomarkers in the brain, with minimal genetic factors and is heavily influenced by environments and experience, could be referred to as social experiences. Right. So we understand this in mad activism; we understand that these are natural human experiences; we understand that reclaiming the term 'madness' is in direct opposition to the biomedical model of mental illness and psychiatry at large. Simultaneously, most social justice movements don't understand that. I'll use the Black Lives Matter movement, which is a movement that I'm very passionate about, for example, I've gone to several protests and heard that racism is a mental illness. And, thinking about some of the ideas behind that: people are trying to refer to someone as damaged, someone who needs to be fixed, someone who is damaging to society, and the idea that the person who is damaging to society is mad-folk at large is a whole new form of mad prejudice that feeds into mad oppression. Now, another piece to this, when I think about mad activism is collective decolonization within the western medical model - and I mean negative aspects of the western medical model. Western medicine contributes in a lot of different ways, but in other ways, harms many-a-person with archaic medications, such as Haldol, Thorazine, Lithium, and otherwise there are so many people who are dying from treatments. And, often we put people in social conditions that are traumatic experiences, trauma absent of the biomedical model but as an experience lens, emotional distress if you will, and these experiences can lead to an array of responses, human responses, and those responses are then treated as illness and then a cure is marketed and then that marketed cure is given back to the illness that was created. There's a lot of elements of madness for me that I feel are natural and inherent to who I am, and then there are also negative aspects of that emotional distress that I know are a purely crafted means of the weaponized capitalist system we live in today. And I urging the global feminist movement to take a moment and think about if we're truly going to be intersectional about our feminism, if we're truly going to include everyone, include mad folk, include psychiatric survivors, include psychiatric disabilities - or folks with psychiatric disabilities, and think about these experiences. And don't think about it singularly as someone is ill or inherently broken; think about how in the media, people who are labeled with mental health diagnoses are portrayed. Think about how on a policy level different groups are impacted and diagnosed. I mean, thinking about diagnoses historically, such as the diagnosis of negritude by the father of psychiatry, Benjamin Rush, in which the only cure was to become white, and that Black people had a form of leprosy that spreads subservience onto white people. Or, drapetomania, the diagnosis in which individuals would run away from their slave masters or their slave masters would become too attached to them. Or, the fact that homosexuality was a diagnosis up until recently, up until the 70s. I mean, and thinking about in 2013 how asexuality was a diagnosis, or how trans identities largely were a diagnosis. How many human identities actually have to be a diagnosis until we realize that mental illness at large is a farce that is harming human beings. And when we think about how colonization at large impacts our society and how we can decolonize and reach our roots of human connection, we could put relationships and human connection at the root of everything

we do, firstly, before we consider anything else. I urge that lens to be thought of and received. I think in my own experience, I reclaimed mad identity as something that for me, madness is something that is, against convention. I question even the very notion of sanism, when we use the term sanism - because what is sanity in the first place. I mean, if sanity is convention, then sanism can apply but thinking about how madness within itself is everything against convention, and it has its intersections with queerness, it has its intersections with reclaiming cultural experiences. I, myself, had to reclaim my Indigenous roots, being raised a Hispanic person but knowing that my roots as a Taino person in the Caribbean, which was largely colonized, you know, that took some time, and that is an identity I've had to reclaim. I view madness in the same way and queerness in the same way; all of these intersecting identities. And I view madness absent of the psychiatric system because I think that that's actually important -- that my mad experiences both intersect but also have representation and absence of psychiatry. And then my psychiatric survivorship, although it's something that intersects simultaneously, is something of its own. And I think as we move forward with the dialogue, I would also like people to think about how can we abolish many of the aspects of the psychiatric system at large that are harmful. And I don't mean that, you know, just completely eliminate a system all at once; I'm talking about abolishing the current system so we can rebuild a new system; I mean, and inevitably, whatever we will build we be another system, but one that centers human connection first, rather than labeling social illness or illness at large. When we think about how psychiatry is one of the only entities in the world that actually isn't regulated by anyone, and the fact that that is occurring within itself is an issue. Many of the medications, through the pharmaceutical industry, are regulated primarily by research that is done by marketing researchers; whereas, psychiatry itself as a practice is put at the very top of everything else. Psychiatrists could put politicians in mental institutions, police officers in mental institutions, social workers in mental institutions: any person of power, and they can actually deem them ill, and in the words of Bonnie Burstow, an anti-psychiatrist and activist, "It's a king-like power that psychiatrists have" over the human population as a whole. That within itself is something that I'd like folx to consider today. Psychiatry is largely white, it's largely run by cis men, it puts a population of folks who don't actually understand the suffering of many oppressed groups in power to craft illness. When I think about madness, I think about many different experiences, whether that's extreme experiences at large, extreme states of being, hearing voices, experiencing visions: things that prior to colonization were viewed as either complicated gifts or things that could actually give insight to other people. I know for myself, many experiences that could be deemed and labeled by psychiatry as a psychotic break, for me, have actually been states of enlightenment that have allowed me to move forward in my life. Without what is referred to as a breakdown, there wouldn't be the breakthrough. And that's been crucial. So just consider that as we move forward in our dialogue. Thank you.

[Thank you so much, Vesper. Our next panelist is Toby Glade.]

Toby Glade

Thank you, Vesper, for those really amazing opening remarks. I'm gonna preface with an apology. I'm in a house full of humans right now and I have a hard time following my own thoughts when there's a lot of background noise, and so I've typed out my comments and I'm just gonna try and slowly read them. Everyone can follow along; I just put the link in the Google

Docs. So if you prefer to process by reading, you can do that, um, along with me. So, hello, everyone. My name is Toby Glade. My pronouns are they/them, and I am a teacher who is currently situated on traditional Piscataway lands at a university that has acknowledged its connections to racial capitalism vis-à-vis slavery, but that is still struggling to formulate its position as a settler colonizer institution on unceded Piscataway territory. In other words, American University, in what is currently known as Washington DC, like most universities, has not come to understand itself in relation to its violent history of white supremacist, cisgenderopatriarchal, able-nationalist colonialism. As a neuroqueer, genderqueer, and basic queer teacher who is part of this institution, I grapple with this question every day. Today I wanted to share with you a few reflections on how I attempt to use my classrooms to create mad feminist community that does not recenter the violence of whiteness. I chose to speak about the classroom because it currently is my major locus of activist work. I used to be much more involved in community organizations, care networks, and alternative kinship structures, but due to a recent move, various health issues, and now a global pandemic, I have had to reorient my activist desires, at least for the short term, to mostly the classroom.

As someone with a teaching-focused full-time position in academia, I am lucky to feel a bit more freedom to shape my classrooms in alternative ways. First of all, I am very open with students about my access needs as an autistic, chronically ill professor. Rarely do students get to experience this kind of openness – an openness that I consider a much more radical basis from which to construct a community of learning. During the semester's first class session I discuss in detail with students what radical access means and I allow students to reconsider their access needs outside of a rights-based accommodations model. I aspire to model my classrooms on what Mia Mingus [spell] calls “access intimacy,” and even though classrooms are inherently ableist – I’d be happy to talk about what that means later – I have experienced classrooms that can still create access intimacy for many of us.

So what does access intimacy look like in the times of Covid? For me, it means checking in with my students, every session, about where they are at, what they can bring, and allowing them to be present (or not) in whatever way works for them. That means never requiring attendance or participation. It means allowing students the choice of whether to have their cameras on or not. It means allowing students to participate verbally or through the chat box (prior to online classes I would have students use note cards). It means being honest about where I am at, what I can bring that day, and then shaping our learning trajectory together. To me, it means always trusting my students. The more cynical will say, but what about those who cheat? I am not interested in wasting my energy-time on trying to police students. I want to invest my energy-time in students who want to get something out of the class. I also want to be humble about the ways in which students might not feel comfortable telling me what is going on in their lives – and oftentimes I think these students might not know how to understand themselves what they are going through. Creating access intimacy to me means teaching with generosity and kindness, offering care and support, and allowing my students to flourish.

Of course, there are limits to the ways in which I can expand the classroom. I do have to give grades. I do have to turn them in at a certain time. I do only have so many hours in the day devoted to work. These are very real limits that oftentimes curtail how my disabled, mad, neuroqueer, and chronically ill students can flourish – especially those who are BIPOC, LGBTQ,

poor, undocumented, etc. in other words, those who have been historically excluded from higher education and continue to be unsupported and discriminated against in many settings. Even with incompletes and the most generous deadlines, I see these students dropping classes and dropping out over and over, and even more so during this global pandemic. The institution continues to set limits to my mad feminist pedagogy, and one day I hope to be able to work in a setting that is a community-based effort outside of settler colonial institutional structures.

Until then, I continue to provide content that teaches students to understand themselves as they are situated in this white supremacist, cisheteropatriarchal, able-nationalist, settler colonialist academic institution. I know this is a mouthful and to those who are not used to hearing these words they can seem alienating. Let me put it this way: I strive to have my students, who are mostly white, at a PWI that caters to the one percent of this country, feel the discomfort of being displaced from the center of the curriculum. Every class, no matter what topic I teach, opens with sessions on settler colonialism, the lands we are occupying, and knowledge about Indigenous issues. I created an Introduction to Disability Studies class for which the materials are 100% created by BIPOC folks. I pay people and communities whose knowledge I use in the classroom. I channel additional funding to local communities and others that we learn through in my classes. I share with my students the ways in which I am trying to inhabit an inherently violent institution in more ethical ways. Together we question the separation between academia and activism, between scholarly and popular writing, between professionals and community members. These are unsettling questions for students who are just being indoctrinated into a social hierarchy that is driven by ableist educational elitism, but to me, these questions remain at the heart of my mad feminist pedagogy. Thank you.

[Thank you very much, Toby. Our next panelist is Allilsa Fernandez.]

Allilsa Fernandez

Good morning everyone, my name is Allilsa Fernandez and I am a brown, queer, non-binary, latinx person. My identity plays a major role in this conversation since both the feminism movement and the mad movement have excluded the voices, stories, experiences, and skills of people like me.

Since the beginning of the suffrage movement we see the involvement of Black women. Formerly enslaved and free Black women, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Maria W. Stewart, Sarah Reymond and Mary Ann Shadd Cary, were active in the women's rights circles in late 1840s. Free Black women assumed leadership roles at multiple women's rights gatherings throughout 1850s and 1860s and in 1851, former slave Sojourner Truth delivered her famous "Ain't I A Woman" speech at the national women's rights convention in Akron, Ohio. After the civil war, in order to tailor to more white women, specifically white women in the South, the suffrage changed. Once joining causes with abolitionists, now stood with racism, even as far as supporting white supremacy. The messaging in the 1840s changed after the civil war towards hostility and violence to the same women who had advanced the cause. The rights to vote passed in 1920 but It left out Black women, the same women who fought alongside white women for those rights. The 19th amendment did not extend to women of African American, Asia American, Hispanic American, and American Indian heritage. Black women and women of color were able to finally vote in 1965, after the civil rights movement, which was led by Black folks.

In the second wave we see more Black women join and lead but other women of color are still left behind and transgender women, especially transgender women of color. In fact, during the Stonewall riots, Marsha P Johnson, a Black women and Sylvia Rivera, a brown women, were demanding their rights as transgender women because they were left out of the feminism movement and the gay rights movement. There was no place for the trans community, to the point that they build the community themselves along with other trans folks. In that second wave we see many TERFS (Trans-exclusionary radical feminist), women who claimed and still claim that transgender women aren't women at all and that they don't share the same struggles, so therefore they cannot join the movement.

The Mad Movement is the same thing. It has been led, it was and still is predominantly white, cis, heterosexual. The Black and brown folks who have joined the movement have not received the recognition they deserve, and more so many black and brown members feel out of place in this movement due to the lack of representation. And so do queer, trans, gender non-conforming and LGBTQIA+ folks.

Until we break away from white supremacy and upholding the statues quo, which is white, we cannot begin to address the intersectional issues that lays between brown, queer, trans, gender non-conforming madness and feminism. A quick example is institutions. The word itself excludes Black and Brown folk's experiences. Many of our ancestors were not in institutions but rather at home, since family members could not pay for their care. Did that mean they suffered any less?. Absolutely not. We erase those experiences by using the word the "institutions". Another example is that our ancestors had long invented grounding techniques and used herbal medicine but it has been white washed, colonized, stolen, and resold to white folks long after the murders of Black and Brown folks who practiced these techniques. There are various intersectionality's between queerness, trans, Black and Brown madness and feminism but it cannot be addressed in a white supremacists' space. We continue to be excluded from both of these spaces (madness and feminism), as Black women were during the suffrage, although we are very much a part of them.

In order to address the madness of people like myself, at the intersections of feminism, these movements must be anti-racist and truly intersectional, meaning trans, gender non-conforming, Black, Indigenous, people of color, and people with disabilities are not felt behind. Thank you.

[Thank you so much, Allilsa. Our next panelist is Delphine Brody.]

Delphine Brody

Thank you. I'm Delphine Brody. I've been part of feminist activism for 27 years and mad activism for 22 years. It was my life experiences as a mad, disabled queer trans womxn and survivor of child-sexual abuse, sexual and relationship violence, and medical abuse* that spurred me to get involved, despite the exclusion of my mad, disabled and trans identities from feminism and despite the wholesale erasure of my identities in the "single-issue" mad movement.

I co-founded and currently organize five networks, collectives and collaboratives in the greater Sacramento Region and two Turtle Island-wide collaborative projects: an autonomous mutual aid peer support network called Mad Love Underground, an organization by and for womxn and femmes to end the rape culture in Sacramento's social justice movement and communities called the Sacramento Women's Council, the Trans & Nonbinary Housing Collective to support safe, permanent, affordable housing within the trans and nonbinary communities, the Grief & Trauma Healing Support Collaborative to hold brave space for people experiencing the heavy emotions of grief and trauma, and the Sacramento Eviction Defense Collaborative to protect tenants from a tsunami of evictions that have begun even during this global pandemic, the Western Mutual Aid Peer Support (Western MAPS) Collaborative to train and assist local peer support organizing throughout Turtle Island, and Gender Justice in the Movement, to call for a culture shift to center and affirm trans, nonbinary, gender-nonconforming, intersex, and two-spirit people within the mad, peer support, user/survivor movement.

I see madness and feminism as inherently connected in several ways. The white settler-colonial cis-hetero-patriarchy, socio-economic class elitism and ableism that dominates our society is quick to label any deviation from the worldview, beliefs, emotions, and perceptions of cisgender, heterosexual, white, nondisabled, ruling-class men as mentally disordered, or mad. Hence, womxn, trans, nonbinary, poor and disabled folk, especially those who are Black, Indigenous and womxn and femmes of color, are overrepresented in the mental health system and more likely to be pathologized as dangerous or "gravely disabled" and treated involuntarily.

Also, each time it is debunked as fallacy and derided as bigotry, white settler-colonial cis-hetero-patriarchy, ableism and class elitism must upgrade its self-serving rationale, requiring ever more sophisticated gaslighting in order to justify the refusal of the privileged to concede power. Therefore, intersectional feminists, who have shown ourselves to be especially adept at identifying these cynical manipulations, are among the first to be singled out as mentally disordered or mad in an attempt to malign our characters, discredit our analyses and silence our voices.

Despite having been majority-populated by womxn from its inception, for most of its history, mad activism has nonetheless largely left whiteness, colonialism, cis-hetero-patriarchy, socio-economic class elitism and ableism unexamined and unchecked, insofar as it has attempted to define itself as a single-issue movement, erasing the struggles and contributions of mad womxn and femmes, especially queer, trans Black, Indigenous womxn of color, and perpetuating a toxic culture where racism, misogyny, sexual and relationship violence, transphobia, classism and ableism all too often go unchallenged. Only over the past fifteen years has a more intersectional approach slowly emerged, and that approach and its leading voices remain very marginalized within today's professionalized "peer" movement, which has been heavily co-opted by a mental health system that functions as an arm of the carceral state. Yet intersectional mad feminisms have nonetheless been birthed and nurtured in unfunded grassroots mutual aid peer support networks, transformative justice pods and disability justice care teams, in mad feminist street theater, street art, avante-garde music and dance. It can be seen in the evolution of mad feminist organizations like Fireweed Collective, Wildflower Alliance, Mad Women in the Attic, and Mad Love Underground.

While “single-issue” mad activism has long worked at cross-purposes with feminism, insofar as it has reinforced rather than challenged rape culture and misogyny, even as “mainstream” feminism has been dominated by white womxn and marginalized the voices and struggles of mad womxn, especially those of mad QT BIPOC and disabled womxn and femmes, I believe it is still not too late for us to change this picture and co-create a truly intersectional mad feminism. Paving the way to this future are organizations that center mad womxn, QT BIPOC and disabled folks like Fireweed Collective, projects that challenge psychiatric oppression, eugenics and rape culture like Sins Invalid and the Disability Justice Culture Club, transformative justice and community accountability work by groups like Project NIA and the Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective, and collaborations that bring together mad womxn and femmes, sex workers, drug users, trans and nonbinary people and survivors, like Sacramento’s Grief & Trauma Healing Support Collaborative.

As a mad feminist, I helped organize and table at a mass feminist march last week as part of a national Women’s March Action. Unfortunately, in failing to name mad womxn in institutions and behind bars, most of the speakers erased our struggle, and this was no accident. Much more work is still needed to counter the ableism and saneism of mainstream feminism, and this can only be accomplished by centering mad womxn and femmes and foregrounding our voices and our stories at rallies and in the media. I recently gave a TV news interview about mad gifts and about how my experiences of child sexual abuse and sexual and relationship violence as an adult shaped my worldview, both creating the conditions in my bodymind that cis-hetero-patriarchal psychiatry saw fit to label mentally disordered and lighting the mad fire of resistance within me that has been a guiding light in my struggle for mad justice, safety, agency, dignity and beloved community.

Mad feminism embraces womxn and femmes as whole human beings and on our own terms. It recognizes the many intersections of oppression and the profound inequities among womxn and among mad people as well as those between mad womxn and mad men, between white mad womxn and femmes and mad BIPOC womxn and femmes of color, between cis and trans womxn, queer and straight womxn, sex workers and non-sex workers. Mad feminism rejects claims to color-blindness, rejects respectability and assimilation for QT and BIPOC people, and rejects notions of worthiness and beauty based on ableist, looksist and sizeist standards.

Mad feminism is quintessentially important in breaking down barriers of misogyny and rape culture in the mad movement as well as saneism and ableism in the feminist movement. When we unite and grow in an intersectional movement, we can participate in many movements. As an openly mad queer trans womxn and feminist, I am active within numerous struggles, and I’m not going to list them because I think my time is probably up, but I look forward to the dialogue - thank you!

[Thank you so much, Delphine. Our last panelist is Maria Rovito.]

Maria Rovito

Hi, so, thank you all for coming. So, my dialogue is mostly related to literature and madwomen in literature because that's what I study, but I will tie it to activism, and I just want to note, I do

have a little bit of a content warning: I do discuss menstruation and psychiatric abuse. So if you're uncomfortable with that, just mute me. So my name is Maria Rovito - my last name is R O V I T O, and I am a PhD candidate in American studies at Penn State University, where I study American literature, disability studies, and women's and gender studies. My pronouns are she/her/hers. I also teach disability studies here at Penn State, alongside English and literature.

I identify as a Madwoman. This has been a lifelong process, beginning when I was ten years old. When I started menstruating at nine, my moods became unleashed, triggering a decades-long battle with family doctors, gynecologists, psychologists, and psychiatrists regarding my emotions. I was diagnosed with premenstrual dysphoric disorder (or, PMDD) when I was 11 years old, and later, endometriosis this summer during the pandemic. Every doctor framed my Madness as a biological issue, yet no one considered why I was becoming Mad in this way.

I decided when I was in my twenties that it was not me who had the problem, but rather, the patriarchy placed these burdens of being a woman on me at the young age of nine. In this way, I view Madness and being Mad as a political identity and state of being rather than a biological condition. It was not up to me to fix or cure my own mood disorder, as doctors always framed it, but rather I believe that our western, patriarchal, saneist society should transform itself to resolve the trauma that girls, women, and nonbinary folx face regarding Madness. In terms of defining saneism, I view saneism as a way to describe sane privilege to people who don't see themselves as Mad or neurodiverse. That is, having a Mad identity is a recognition of the oppression and marginalization I face for not experiencing the world as a non-Mad person might.

Being Mad has a long history within my family. In the 1960s, my great grandmother, an Irish immigrant who had twelve children and married three times, went Mad and was locked in an attic for a week by her daughter. She escaped, only for the police to find her and put her in a psychiatric institution, where she died. I believe that she was not just mentally ill--but rather, she was filled with rage from years of living in a society that devalued women. As many people have told me, she was truly a living representation of the Mad Creole woman, Bertha Mason, from Charlotte Brontë's Victorian novel, *Jane Eyre* (1847). I believe that my great grandmother shared much of the frustration and rage that Bertha carried in the novel, and expressed by literally burning down Thornfield Hall.

I inherited this rage, which comes out in my own writing. My literary research is quite focused on the American writer Sylvia Plath, who wrote the coming-of-age novel, *The Bell Jar* (1963), as well as a plethora of poems, short stories, letters, and journals. As many of you might know from historical and cultural tropes, Plath has been canonized as a Madwoman who was freed of her suffering through her suicide in 1963. My research tries to show that this cultural narrative of Plath largely isn't true. Instead, I believe that Plath was a brilliant and luminous woman who devoted much of her life to her work and her children. Plath's husband, the British poet Ted Hughes, fueled this depressive narrative of Plath after her death, telling critics and scholars that Plath was, indeed, mentally ill. However, using archival materials and newly acquired Plath sources, I hope to demystify Plath and cast her as a woman living in a patriarchal, saneist society that pathologizes Madwomen.

Similar to Plath, I had my own mental breakdown while I was in college, and was placed in a psychiatric system that largely didn't care how I felt, and didn't understand the patriarchal forces against me as a young woman. In this sense, I relate so much to Plath, and believe that the typical, cultural, saneist construction of Plath does real harm to the girls, women, and nonbinary folk who enjoy her work as well. Plath's work has given me an agency as a Madwoman that no type of medical authority or establishment can take away from me.

I hope to show in my work that girls can push back against saneist cultural practices that cause so much bodily and emotional damage. It is my hope that feminist Mad studies (the term I use in my own work) can create Mad-positive thinking and experiences for girls that don't set them up for a life of trauma. Using both Jane Eyre and The Bell Jar in my own teaching, I hope to demonstrate to my students that they, too, can rebel against the patriarchal confinements of psychiatry. Thank you.

Jessica

Thank you, Maria. Can our other moderator from the Seneca Falls Dialogues, Christina, please switch us back to the gallery mode - just formally. I've done it on my screen but I wanna make sure that we can have that for the rest of the time here. So we have until, I believe it's, 11:45 Eastern Standard Time, together. If people would like to pose questions, there are two ways that we can do it. One is, you can raise your hand or use the hand raise button, which is on, again, if you - I'm not seeing it on mine right now. Is anyone seeing the hand raise button?

[Yes.]

[Um, there should be a hand raise button.]

Yeah, so we can hopefully use that or raise your hand if you have a video on, or you can use the chat box to write a question that you would like to ask our panelists to respond to. And would also say that the panelists can also ask each other questions based on the listening that we've just done with these profound contributions. So, would anyone like to, from our audience, first, like to pose a question for the panelists, just in response to what you've been listening to or what you have been reading in the document?

And do any of our panelists have any cross-topics or anything that someone else spoke about that they would like to inquire more about or respond to in some way?

Oh, we have a question over here. Oh, thank you, _____.

Hi, I just saw-- Tamar, is it? Would you like to speak?

Tamar

Yeah, hi; thanks, um, I've enjoyed listening to everybody. I'm from Birmingham, in England. There's one thing that I was thinking about as I was listening to everybody - was that um, you were all talking about difference and almost kind of tripping over all these different words you've

got to describe difference, and all these little, kind of, groups. In the end, it's almost kind of, a, sort of a, how to describe this: there's so many little groups; it almost makes it one big group. I was just wondering what people thought about that, 'cause it's... is this making sense to people? We're talking about difference but a lot of it really, it all boils down to the same thing -- it's about tolerance. So, yeah, I just wondered, I just thought I'd kind of throw that in and see what responses people had.

Jessica

Yes, and any of the panelists please feel free to respond as you wish. Does someone want to start? Maybe a way of sort of thinking about this is with so many different groups, and different agendas that those groups hold, are there ways -- how is solidarity formed through all of those different groups and is that solidarity something we want? What is solidarity - that's another kind of thing - for mad feminist activism? Is it a helpful term?

Delphine

Um, I wanna quote Audre Lorde on this - who has famously said, "For it is not difference which immobilizes us but silence, and there are so many silences to be broken." And I think that it's critical that we keep that truth alive in our movements today and always remember to look at who might not be in the room and whose voices and experiences may be silenced in this space that we're in-- and to find ways to center those people and their voices.

Tamar

Thanks, cheers, and I suppose that the other part of it really was I thought it was an interesting juxtaposition, ugh tripping over words, just thinking that each panelist was talking about exclusion, and I was just thinking that if any of these - any of the talks have been given in other spaces, the language would feel quite exclusionary in itself even to the groups that we're talking about so, um, yeah. I was just wondering what you thought about that. It's almost as though we've kind of developed a dialogue or a language that is exclusionary that kind of mirrors the exclusion that we receive; so I was just wondering what people thought about that, or... I'll chuck it over to you, and hopefully you know what I'm talking about. I'm sort of an academic, I just use... I choose to use colloquialisms.

Jessica

I think maybe each of our panelists could say something about that. I think it's a point that I know that I struggle with. What about exclusion? What about exclusionary language?

Maria

Maybe I should say something about that. So, first off, I really like your hair. It's awesome. Um, yeah so in terms of madness and identifying as mad, um, I've, so the way I frame it to my students is I view being mad as a political identity, and I said this in my talk, and what I mean by that is I don't think - in my opinion, you don't have to have a psychiatric diagnosis to identify as

mad. I view those as totally different things. So, I think, in terms of - I think, just identifying as mad and being a mad ally creates solidarity in that regard, in terms of the Mad Pride movement and mad feminism. Is that helpful at all?

Jessica

Well, I think, if I'm correct, the question is about how the language that we're using, even in some of the speeches we're giving today, is still exclusionary, and how do we feel about that and what can we do about that? And I know Allilsa, you were trying to maybe say something.

Allilsa

Yeah. So this is Allilsa. And as a Brown folk with all these intersections in my life, as well. I think Delphine mentioned some resources that we can lean to. The exclusionary words exist in white supremacy spaces, absolutely. I don't think that that's the case for other spaces, and I think that is why more Black and Brown folxs, with the intersection of transgender, queerness, disability, ecetera; I think that this is why we're beginning to create our own spaces because for so long we have tried to force our ways, like Black women during suffrage, and in that second wave - like "listen to me, please listen to me, let's work together, let's do this together," and they're like "no, only whites, only whites, you're less, only whites," so now we see this break, and we're like "you know what, we're not even gonna come in. They don't care for us; we're gonna just deviate and just create spaces with allies." And so, we should look at spaces who are doing it right. There are spaces who are doing it right, and Delphine mentioned those resources. Sins Invalid, Disability Justice, Fireweed Collective -- so looking at these spaces that are truly intersectional; they really speak about feminism at the intersection of race, at the intersection of gender and sexuality, and they're really not exclusionary. In fact, white people just like Black people and Transgender folk, they find themselves in the spaces and they're like "Oh my God; I feel at home! Why do I feel at home?" And I think it's because these spaces are created in equity. There isn't a supremacy of people of color nor of a supremacy of whites; it's all equity. And there's some exchange of voices between white, Black, and Transgender, etc., voices.

Jessica

Do others want to respond to this as well?

Vesper

I would like to. Um, I think that there's an importance between, you know, there's almost this line, right, between representation and simultaneously where representation leads to tokenism, and where exclusion and exclusion of language, you know, it can be important representation to have that language in specific spaces or to bring that language to other spaces, which can be exclusionary of other identities, inherently. I think, um, the state of being is, you know, the state of living is so complex - there's so much to human beings that it's important for us to try to represent as many of those identities as possible. And particularly, as we're decolonizing our society, like I was talking about earlier, you will find that a lot of the identities that we're finding: we'll find more and more and more and more and more, and what that truly is is that

we're trying to get back to the baser root of almost this interconnection between all human beings inherently that exists naturally-- very Indigenous ideals, um, and as society is collectively healing, representation of specific social groups will be necessary. And both the reclamation and the pursuit of justice will be important in that process, too, and it has been. And it's happening, and it'll continue to happen until hopefully one day every social group has its own space and representation is there across the board. And, yes, I think this is very much a disability justice lens of collective access, collective liberation, and sustainability moving forward for social movements and social groups.

Allilsa

This is Allilsa, I just added them to the chat box: some of the spaces that are very inclusive.

Jessica

Do others on the panel or in the dialogue want to respond to this before we take another question or talk about another issue because we could certainly continue to discuss this.

Okay, are there other audience members who might want to ask a question now or to share a thought? Yes, yes.

Kendle

Hi, my name is Kendle; I use She/Her, and so I'm finishing up my undergraduate degree and am interested in pursuing even more in my PhD and getting my master's and everything like that, and my question is to those of you who are persons of academia, how have you dealt with the pushback from either, like, the institution you work at or other people in your field, with being a part of mad feminism more and trying to include mad feminism in your school or in your classroom? And have you found it difficult to gain support from other scholars in academia? And I would also extend the question to those who are outside of academia, just in your, you know, profession.

Jessica

Would anyone like to respond to this?

Maria

Maybe I should talk for a bit about this. So, during the first semester of graduate school for me - that was 2016 - I asked for disability accommodations for my madness, per se, um, and I, um, found that the institution that I was at was like incredibly ablelist and sanist toward me. I was, actually, I was kicked out of the university for having a disability and having a mental illness, and, yeah, I think it's a tricky line, I would say, as to - as far as disclosure in higher education. There's a great essay about this; it's called "The Mad Border." It's by Shayda Kafai. It's on Disability Studies Quarterly. And it's all about how, um, higher education institutions, if you live on the boundary between sane and insane, it's really difficult because you're almost actively

excluded through your identity. So I think you have to be very careful about disclosure and who you're disclosing to - like, I don't disclose to my students about anything, and even my dissertation advisor, he doesn't know that I have a mental illness. And I don't use mental illness in a biological term; I'm just saying that to say my diagnosis. But, yeah, I just think you have to be very careful. I hope that was helpful; I don't think that was very helpful.

Toby

Hi, this is Toby Glade speaking. Yeah, just to add on to what Maria was saying, I think there's a fine line you have to walk when you work in a white supremacist ableist institution, where you have to figure out who you can trust and who you can talk to. Um, I found a lot of solidarity in disability studies circles. Um, there's a lot of mad identified folx who, we end up at the same conferences, we support each other online and through check-ins and doing other things to help each other out. But, I think for me the most important question is, you know, how do I provide a role model to students - so in what ways do I disclose while not risking my own position, um, because my status of being in this country and of having a livable income is based on my continuation in that institution, right, um, and so I think if you're thinking about going into higher education, you know, the question just has to be for yourself: to what extent are you able to engage in these kinds of negotiations, and having to sometimes leave parts of yourself out of certain spaces, but that's of course that we all do in different ways all the time, right, um except I think for the kids of spaces that Vesper and Allilsa pointed to that are safer spaces for folx who tend to always have to leave like most of themselves outside of the room - um, I mean academia is just, it's like any other workplace that's part of a capitalist white supremacist structure that we live in. But I can give an example; so when I was trying to organize a disability studies symposium, um just to sort of help everyone understand how we can think about access as not just an accommodations-based, you know, bright space model, but what access actually feels like when it's radical, when it's transformative, right, when it feels -- those of us who have been in what feels - like Crip Solidarity spaces - know what those feel like, and it's just magical. And so I wanted people at my institution to have that experience, and once we were actually in a space together that I was mostly able to shape in ways that were really, you know, considerate of a lot of different access needs, um, it felt really good; but the way there was really hard, and I had to do a lot of explaining. So you'll have to spend a lot of energy explaining to people - okay, why are we using, not person-first but identity-first language, right, um, I made a call that said, "All disabled students, faculty, and staff are invited to this--" I got so much pushback about using that language, and you'll just have to think about how every step of the way, am I willing to either explain things -- and this goes back to that previous question that Tamar was asking - about that language, right. How do I get people-- how much time and energy do can I spend explaining to people, like, where has this language come from, why is it important to me to say "I'm an autistic person and I don't wanna be called a person with autism." Where does that come from? How is that different in different cultural contexts? I know in Great Britain, the language used is ... there is like a big difference between the U.S. and the U.K. context, and then many other places. And how much are you able to do that in the space that you have to inhabit. Um, yeah, I'll stop there.

Allilsa

Yeah, I would just piggyback off of that and say the other side is if you feel you're an activist or an advocate, it seems better, like I'm going into law school, and I'm open with everybody: all the professors know; they're helping me with the whole entire process. Everyone in academia knows what I have. And I am not ashamed. It depends on who you are. I live openly. I am openly queer, I am openly Brown, I am openly a person who lives with psychosis, and I don't feel I need to hide a part of me. So I really think that you need to know who you are and where you're at, and everybody's different, everybody's a different space. For me, I live very vividly, and in academia it's been actually: I've created a more supportive environment because I've been so open. Like, I've been in very ableist spaces in law, that they don't even know the word disability. They're like "huh, I don't really know much about it," but I choose to explain. And then they're like, "Oh, so wow, let me see if I can connect you with resources, how can I help you...," and then they really go that extra mile for me, so I think it's really knowing who you are, where you stand, and what you're capable of when it comes to advocacy and activism.

Maria

But just to, like, go off of that, I think it's, it highly depends on the type of institution you're at, um, because where I'm at, we're in rural Pennsylvania, and a lot of my students and administration are very conservative and not accepting of marginalized identities. So I think sometimes it's great to be open about your intersectional identities and such, but I think in certain places you might get a lot of pushback on that, which is why I'm not open about my psychiatric diagnoses with my students and professors, um, so say, I'm just saying it highly depends on where you're at in the world.

Jessica

Right, and that raises the issue about things that we can hide and things that we can't hide, and there's also a problematic aspects of that, too, to interrogate the idea of "Oh, well, I, I can't hide this" but then there are things that we can't hide too. So, okay. I think we have about five minutes left in our time today. Is there another question that we could take from someone who is part of this dialogue who hasn't asked a question yet or spoken yet? I just wanna start there. Otherwise, I see things in the chat here that maybe I can go to. Tamar, did you want to speak about this? I know that you're writing in the chat.

Tamar

And, yeah, I was just thinking, um, that a lot of this was on my mind as a lived experience practitioner, which is basically someone who uses or cites lived experience in the work that they do - you're doing it kind of openly, you know, peer support work. One thing I find is that people have had really bad, horrific discrimination, so this is about having to work ten times harder. I mean, kind of being, you know, sort of mixed race, disabled, whatever - it's nothing quite like working openly within a mental health services and being open about your mental health. There's something about that that is, oh, you know, you can - anyway, it's just that, all I can is that it's so, so bad - and this year, I've ended up, after not being in hospitals since 2005, I ended up hospitalized for a month and a couple of overdoses, two seizures, kind of like just really, really bad, and a lot of that had come from just basically really deciding I'm not gonna put up with this

anymore, I'm going to kind of like really, really just kind of make a stand, and kind of, you know, this is gonna go, even if it goes to tribunal court, people are gonna have to just be accountable for their actions. So, in doing that and thinking about, you know, manage it, you know I've sort of ended up in a hospital full of people just trying to, you know, be there who ended up in the hospital. But it was one of the things one was talking about the language of exclusion and that's because everything I've done, all that academia, all of this work as King's College, you know doing research, all this stuff that I've done behind the scenes of working, so that would have been the National Health Service, ended up being aboard for the Irish, Greek ... you just sort of all this stuff, and yet I've come back and I'm kind of worth shit at work, so, again, coming back to the exclusionary language, I was just thinking that what I've been doing at work was basically, you know, really trying to over-justify everything. You know, case studies, kind of like documents, kind of, you know just things and I'm starting to realize other people don't have to do that. They just say something and it is. And, a lot of the time they're saying something and it is, and actually it isn't, and it doesn't sort of fit in with like practice or research or theory or what have you, so I've just kind of got to the point where I'm just like "you know what, these rules don't apply so you can have new case studies, so you can have - you know you can do everything and yet in the end, you're having to justify so much, people don't hear what the actual message is underneath." SO, um, yeah I think we've just got to the point where it's just like, fuck it, you know you're gonna have to listen and do it, and I'm just going to say it as it is, cut the bullshit, I can back it up with whatever you wanna have or what have you. But this is it. So just want to... anyone else try to, cause you just get to the point where you're like, you know what, at work... I'd earn more if I went stacking shelves at the local... so, do you know what, I've got nothing to lose, and I'm just as well qualified as you guys working as directors and what have you. You've got your mortgages to lose but I can say stuff that you can't. And so it's really, um, I think when you just drop it, you find you've actually got so much power. And there's people there that wanna say this stuff and they cannot say it cause you know what they've got their mortgage and their paying for kids' private education.

Jessica

I'm gonna chime in here, because I don't want us to all be cut off. I know that we only have until... so if one of our panelists or two of our panelists wanna make a final response or remark, I think we have to wrap up in just a moment.

Vesper

I just wanna say for many of us, activists in different spaces, we often, in professional roles, we have to refer to ourselves as people with lived experience; we can't talk about the living experience. I mean, forbid that we have any form of active distress right now, you know it's true, um, so, I just wanted to say that that's very true as well, and that there's at least solidarity amongst one another.

Jessica

Any other final remarks from our panelists here as we wrap up. I just want to thank all of -- everyone who is in this space with us today -- for this wonderful dialogue, and especially to our

panelists for sharing your expertise and your hearts and all of the care that you put into being here, and I hope that this space will be something that we can learn from, when we make this recording public; hopefully this can inform future dialogues that happen. And, again, I'm grateful for everyone who's here, and have a wonderful, good day, and take care.

Thank you everybody.

Thank you, Christina.

Christina

A lot to think about. I was so happy to hear everyone speak.

[Bye. Bye everybody.]