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Mad Epistemologies and Crip Doulaing: A Study of Select Zines on Mental Health

¹**Amal George**, Ph. D Scholar, Department of English, Pondicherry University.

Email: amalgk1209@gmail.com

²**Dr. K. Reshmi**, Professor, Department of English, Pondicherry University

Email: reshmi@pondiuni.ac.in

Abstract

While the biomedical model dominates global understanding of mental distress, mad zines emerge as a unique site of resistance. This paper draws on crip theory and mad studies to critically analyse how these non-commercial, self-published works challenge dominant biopsychiatric discourses and champion survivor/user voice from the margins. Moving beyond mere personal confessionals, the zines operate as borderlands rhetoric and carve out a ‘third space’ that navigates the intersections of minority identities.

Lilith Cooper has demonstrated how zines on disability could act as ‘crip doulas’ that offer practical, lived wisdom to individuals entering the disability community. This study extends that framework to the realm of mad zines, examining their unique thematic and stylistic features. Beyond their role as counter-cultural artefacts, these zines provide the necessary tools for prefigurative politics and internal coalition-building. Additionally, the study asserts that mad zines contribute significantly to a distinct mad epistemology by demonstrating madness as a productive and legitimate way of being in, interacting with and understanding the world.

Keywords: Zines, Mad Studies, Psychosocial Disability, Mental Health, Disability Justice.

Introduction

Zines, broadly put, are self-published, DIY, not-for-profit booklets or pamphlets. The genealogy of Anglophone zines could be traced back to the science fiction fanzines made in the 1930s. Contemporary zines are difficult to define and categorise and are understood as a diverse set of practices, driven by certain values, necessity, or history and essentially “rooted in the idea of DIY-no-skill non-profit forms of self-publishing” (Casio 3). Zinesters control the content, presentation, and distribution of their work while experimenting with multi-modal dimensions and expansive perspectives. They build on a body of work centred on countercultures, social activism, and

storytelling. Zines reject the visual aesthetics of the glossy, mass-produced media and even controversially resist digitisation and archiving in a bid to preserve their ephemeral nature. Zine culture has historically aligned with marginalised groups, punk culture, and niche interests, positioning itself as an alternative and subversive media form frequently characterised as “notes from the underground”. Furthermore, zines could be sites of ambivalence, hold the potential to offer alternative forms of memory making in response to trauma and function as autoethnographies that articulate the self while linking personal experiences with wider cultural, social and political contexts. Identity work done using a personal or confessional tone makes zines unique, and zine makers use the proximal nature and ephemerality of zines to their advantage. Personal zines, or ‘perzines’, explore themes of identity and embodiment, especially for people of colour, gender-diverse and queer communities. Zine making burgeoned during 2020 during Covid lockdowns, with ‘quaranzines’ documenting the global effects of lockdown and delving into the conceptualisations of COVID time as extended grief time and eugenics time (Cooper 175).

Zines as Liminal/Borderlands Rhetoric

The concept of liminality emerged from the work of anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep in the early 1900s, who remarked that “the life of an individual in any society is a series of passages from one age to another and from one occupation to another” (Gennep 231). Gennep’s rites of passage divided the transition from one social state to the other into three stages – separation, margin, and aggregation. Victor Turner adopted this in his work titled *The Forest of Symbols*, in the study of rituals as a part of social transformation, and defined the period of margin or liminality as an intersectional spatio-temporal concept wherein a person is between two states or undergoing a process of ontological and embodied transformation. Liminal is also described by Turner as ‘a realm of pure possibility’, unlike the initiation process, which is dictated by ritual elders, and the culturally sacred is unquestionable.

Adela Licona attempted a study of zines as ‘borderlands rhetoric’, defining the border as material and metaphoric, and as both visible and invisible. Licona’s work was inspired by Chicana feminist scholar Gloria Anzaldúa’s book *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, which theorised borderlands as physical and metaphorical in-between spaces embracing intersectionality, offering potentialities for resistance, transformation, fluidity, and interconnectedness. Borders have historically served the ends of demarcation and division, much like binaries when concerned with identity formation, whereas borderlands rhetorics are those which hold the potential to reconstruct stories, identities, places, histories, and experiences in such a way as to not only expose misrepresentations but also to uncover or produce new perspectives.

Bridging manuscripts and printed books, zines ‘occupy a rather uneasy place between the public and private’ (Cooper 207), providing a third space for multiple ways of knowing and being. In the context of mental health, where users and survivors are sidelined, zines can bridge academic and non-academic knowledge and trouble the binary between producer/consumer,

amateur/professional, and patient/professional. Many zines value embodied and affective knowledges to become what Adela Licona describes as ‘third space epistemologies’ without entirely avoiding academic theory. Furthermore, Cooper comments that zines actively seek to build coalitions between communities founded on shared affinities to strive for social justice. Zines as third-space sites of borderlands rhetoric embody potential for social transformation through disruptive acts, dissident performances, and transigrations that affect new social, cultural, political, economic, and sexual configurations and coalitions. The emergent and creative cultural reconfigurations in zines serve to educate and inform while also reclaiming community and redefining community values.

Crip Doulaing and Care in Communities

Korean American disability activist Stacey Park Milbern espoused ‘crip doulaing’ as naming disability as a space we can be born into, supported and welcomed by other disabled people so that we are not “left alone to figure out how to be... in this ableist world” (Samarasinha 241). She remarked that the transition itself, of becoming disabled or moving along the ability spectrum, is frequently invisibilised, to the point that these changes do not even have a name” (240). Milbern’s doula draws from a repository of non-medical, community-orientated knowledge existing outside formal institutions. Doulaing births disability as a non-medical paradigm, delineating life stages and rites of passages of ‘becoming’ disabled and stressing the idea that being disabled or crip is an immanent process of becoming, a perennial process of reconstitution. Crip doulaing is both interpersonal and dynamic in nature and concerns itself with archiving useful knowledge around disability.

The idea of zines functioning as crip doulas was first extensively studied by Lilith Cooper in her work *The zIne-Between: A Creative Practice Exploration of Health, Liminality, Lived Experience and the Zines in Wellcome Collection*. Zines that record and share practical knowledge, such as welfare and disability benefits, uphold the value of disabled lives and resist the rhetoric of the disabled as benefit scroungers. They also resist the paradigm of disability as death (disabled lives as not worth living), which is linked to a rise in disability hate crimes. An example of the same is *Your Life is Not Over: A Book of Apocalypses and How to Survive Them*, by Fiona Robertson, which accuses the UK social welfare system of assuming that the disabled are attempting to defraud the system, unless proven otherwise, which permeates into how disability is viewed in the society. Zines built around similar objectives often address the anxiety around accessing disability benefits and challenge constructions of disability as a burden, of disabled people as scroungers, and of disability as a moral failing, and in doing so, they doula disabled identities that are grounded in the right to support. Such zines could potentially function as vital resources for currently enabled, pre-disabled or temporarily able-bodied people.

User, Survivor Voices Against Biopsychiatry

Mad studies could be broadly defined as an in/discipline, multi-vocal praxis informed by the histories of service users, survivor activism, and mad lived experiences. Psychiatry, while constituting madness as mental illness, has established the mad subject as the antithesis of reason, which subsequently positions them outside the hermeneutic fields. Mentally distressed individuals are not considered credible knowers, which points to the fact that at the level of knowledge itself, they are disempowered and subjected to an epistemic injustice. On the other hand, the hermeneutic space is governed by ‘psy’ sciences, which operate through the individuation and the extrication of individuals from their social settings. Biopsychiatry is critiqued by service users for privileging method over content and ethical and relational processes. Participatory research is non-existent, with ‘mad’ groups being excluded systematically from the topography, citing their inability to produce ‘reliable evidence’. Generalisability is yet another fallacy the psy sciences indulge in, as attempts to scale up build on the assumption that evidence-based interventions can be applied universally. At this juncture, psychosocially disabled individuals taking control of their own narratives is critical in challenging psychiatric hegemony. Zines could be put to use to critique psychiatry, to view madness as a productive site of knowledge and to provide practical help which might not align well with psychiatric scripts.

Considering the political economy and governance in interaction with disability, austerity policies in the West have catalysed hate crimes against people with mental distress and have compromised the employment statuses of individuals with mental health problems. Lack of employment opportunities invariably translates into poverty, although the invalidity benefits are theoretically in place, subject to an assessment which is largely skewed toward physical impairment. Such issues are exacerbated by a climate of heightened individualism where the individual is responsible for self-surveillance and the eradication of poverty. Social security benefits for the disabled are reliant upon documentation and letters from allied health professionals, which puts survivors who denounce formal services and psychiatric nosology in a precarious position. Zines produced by groups such as Disabled People Against Cuts (DPAC) or the Mental Health Resistance Network are relevant here, as they provide practical advice on navigating austerity policies while simultaneously critiquing them.

Survivor-user communities such as Recovery in the Bin (RiTB) and Kindred Minds Manifesto have resorted to activism mostly in underground spaces to challenge psychiatric hegemony and continue to contribute to mad forms of knowledge. An example is the concept of neorecovery, which exposes how the prevailing conditions make recovery impossible and how the recovery approach ultimately makes people feel guilty by placing goals that they cannot achieve. Recovery in the Bin, in addition to this, trains people in form filling, navigating interviews and organising activities to help people navigate the system. Those contributing to the collective, however, intentionally remain anonymous for fear that an open demonstration of abilities would run the risk of being exposed as ‘fit to work’ and potentially severing social security benefits. Both

communities also employ zines and leaflets to communicate their ideas and encourage others to do the same. Such forms of knowledge, nevertheless, are integral contributions of mad epistemologies, which are characterised by plurality, fluidity, ambiguity and heterogeneity, with a commitment to social justice and which stand in opposition to mainstream or hegemonic hierarchies of knowledge. Firsthand knowledge of users and survivors navigating the world is invaluable for extending support to the newly disabled, for challenging ableism and for promoting madness as a legitimate and yet different way of being and living. Mental health zines that are scrutinised here offer glimpses of mad knowledges built on everyday experiences that are beneficial to peers embarking on similar paths.

Mental Health Zines And Crip Doulaing

The zines chosen for analysis have been selected on the basis of accessibility and their thematic focus. For this study, zines that explicitly deal with the theme of mental health, or ‘mad zines’, are selected. Although such zines are not rare, due to their ephemeral character, they are hard to procure, and some zinesters resist digitisation and archiving of their zines to maintain the safe spaces associated with the subculture. These mad zines are representative of the category, as they embody the aesthetic and rhetoric qualities usually found in such works.

Mindful Occupation: Rising Up Without Burning Out is a zine created by the Occupy Mental Health Project, a collective consisting of mental health professionals, street medics and activists. The document is framed as a living document, aimed to function as emotional first aid within activist movements. At the outset, it defines radical mental health as a novel perspective that views mental illness through the lenses of diversity and empowerment. Challenging the medicalised definitions of normality, the zine reframes disorders or altered mental states as gifts to be cultivated. While mainstream discourses, tied to a marketplace ideology, focus solely on brain chemistry, radical mental health works at the convergence of social, environmental, cultural and political factors and reminds us that individual well-being stems from collective well-being. The zine emphasises the value of embodied expertise as a valid source of knowledge, advocates for creating new metaphors for reflecting distress, and promotes harm reduction approaches that recognise self-determination regarding medication. Linking mental health to power structures, the work criticises the medico-industrial complex for profiting from framing human experiences as disorders and for historically pathologising marginalised groups. A considerable portion of the zine is dedicated to providing help to activists, such as emotional first aid tents and listening spaces, and it encourages the activists to rely on mutual aid, which is reciprocal and non-hierarchical. There are detailed instructions to help the readers support people undergoing a panic attack or psychotic break and to manage medication withdrawal during protests.

Mad Menu zine discusses food ideas for people who find it hard to feed themselves because of their madness, as impairment effects often leave one with no energy to cope with preparing meals and the forethought and planning required in cooking and washing up. The zine is a compilation

of recipes and food ideas from the zinester's 'mad' comrades and combines the concept of intuitive eating, which is associated with the anti-diet movement, with firsthand experiences of eating disorders. The concept of 'crip time' – the differential ways in which disabled individuals experience time – and the links of disability to food choice are explored in the zine in addition to listing the available forms of food aid in the UK.

A queer guide to disability benefits is a zine written by a queer-neurodivergent duo and deals with the cumbersome processes of SSI/SSDI benefits application in the state of Oregon, Portland. The zine's objective, as stated at its outset, is to "provide relatable information, ample resources and tangible support to our greater disabled queer community as they traverse the sometimes rocky, confusing, exhausting path towards securing stable income through government assistance programs" (3). The zine has multimodal content ranging from personal anecdotes to logistical play-by-plays of the SSI/SSDI application process to tips on how to handle doctors' appointments. Additionally, navigating the emotional aspects of the process, such as steeling oneself against scapegoating and invalidation, are discussed in the zine.

"You could be gaslit left and right, or you may experience things that bring up old traumas. The trauma of applying for disability pushed me into a place of deep trauma and sickness, which ironically, ultimately helped me get it. I became so scared about anything being used against me that my good days started to scare me, afraid that if I felt good sometimes, no one would believe me, and I wouldn't get the safety net I needed. This sounds tough, and it can be – but again, in a weird and skewed way, it can ultimately help your case; it can show how deeply troubling functioning and living can be when under any pressure" (11)

Invoking themes of crip doulaing, the zinemakers suggest that the bitter experiences spanning across years of negotiating with bureaucracy have inspired them to aid their peers. The zine maker states, "Applying for disability felt like a full-time job—going to doctors, unpacking my ableism, being sick, dealing with traumatizing healthcare experiences, and also becoming an unofficial social worker as I got to know resources and pass them along to other friends and folks in community" (12).

Hurting Yourself is a zine workbook published by the Icarus Project that deals with topics such as harm minimisation and self-harm resilience. Non-Suicidal Self Injury (NSSI) is diagnosed as a psychiatric disorder by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). A section of radical mental health activists, however, has controversially made a case for the same to be understood as a means for inducing an altered state of consciousness and as useful in preventing dissociation in depersonalised states of being. In the zine, self-harm tendencies are then juxtaposed with historical, culturally and religiously orientated rites of passage such as flagellations in Mediterranean Catholic traditions, Kaihogyo or the physical endurance training in Tendai Buddhism, ritualistic traditions in the Sun Dance practised by the Native Americans, and certain rituals linked to the Day of Ashura in Shi'a and Alawite Muslims. The Zine has several

suggestions for safer self-harming practices, as “sometimes hurting yourself is the lesser of all available evils. When you don’t have the tool you need, you use the tool you have” (28). The zine does not condone the extreme forms of self-harming tendencies and offers a personal anecdote suggesting how the prolonged use of SSRIs has exacerbated such tendencies in the past.

Class Struggle and Mental Health: Live to Fight Another Day is an anthology of activist accounts associated with Libcom.org and the Edmonton Small Press Association. Unlike most zines on mental health discussed here, this pamphlet is wary of denouncing professional medical advice. Written mainly for activists engaged in class politics, the first four parts deal with depressive disorder and contain personal accounts of living with depression. The zine demonstrates why the personal is political and why it is imperative to take care of mental health. Furthermore, the work offers resources for self-care and lists affordable modes of therapy. The zine exposes how recovery is hard under systems of capitalism and features works of several artists and illustrators as well, which deal with several stereotypes associated with depression, stigma, disability and the disabling effects of capitalism. The comic strip titled *Winter Blues* by Lauren Purje dismantles the stereotype of the artist as the ‘depressed creative genius’, and b.patrick.jo’s work illustrates how ableism functions and how the disabled individuals are often accused of being narcissists. Candice’s cartoon critiques consumption culture and the formulation of the individual as the entrepreneur of the self. Kelly Bastow’s illustration in the zine is yet another critique of a stereotype of depression and how it potentially derails one’s attempts to ‘come out’ as disabled.

Mad/e is a zine commissioned by the Museum of Homelessness to reframe mainstream narratives around mental illnesses and to celebrate survivor heritage, which is made “outside systems that can harm people further”. A confession in the zine juxtaposes the Japanese art form Kintsugi and the humane act of embracing imperfections, which also forms an integral part of neurodivergent paradigms. *Taking My Madness for a Day Out* is a first-person narrative which traces the events of a bus ride, which ignites the radical idea of ‘being with and listening to’ madness rather than resisting or silencing it. The account views madness as a productive site for understanding the world and oneself. Figuring out that her “madness needed beauty; it needed a world beautiful enough to save its soul”, the author walks to the ocean. Instead of her earlier trips to the ocean predicated by a desire to drown herself, this time, she attempts being kind to the voices.

It was not just psychiatry that put people in cages. Those who want power over people use cages, and they don’t have to be physical ones. They helped make the cage within me to conquer and quell me by getting me to hate myself. That hatred kept me a quiet animal, the only time I roared was to salvage my own self. I would never be madness free but I can free my madness. I could free it of having to battle, assimilate or stand up to normality... Just be with it, care for it and let it breathe, stop trying to strangle it (30-31).

No More Doctors! By @parasocial_work is an exploration of the mental health complexes and caregiving in the contemporary capitalist societies. The zine advocates for more autonomy and

choice in care, material aid and community-based experience, in addition to critiquing the lack of scientific basis in medical staff being ‘sole arbiters of power over care’, for ignoring community-based care and for the privatisation and corporatisation of care. The zinester puts forth how psychiatric services have reconstituted mental health as people management, which by “design seeks to sort the loud and scary symptoms from the benign and seclude, restrain, sedate, and intimidate complex cases into treatment through threat of escalation” (16). The attempts made by biopsychiatry are aimed at case management, and rather than truly curing people, it seeks to subjugate and restore a semblance of normalcy in the distressed individual so that ‘passing’ as a functioning member of the society can be effectively pulled off.

Further delving into the issues plaguing the mental healthcare industry, the zine discusses the band-aid services administered to complex cases by underpaid, culturally dissonant organisations while service funding models force out untreated people. The zine recommends that the dichotomies in place, such as the professional versus the patient, must be dismantled and replaced by collaborative efforts. Furthermore, it states that peers and patients should be able to join recovery processes, and caregiving must employ measures that welcome trauma responses without the fear of incoherence, mania or social acceptability. The zinester envisages a future wherein peers are allowed to participate in designing alternative care paradigms and where meds are administered with informed consent, with rigorous measures of review, adjustments and careful titration. Echoing the concept of *crip doulaing*, the zine marks the instance of radical hope and care as a process of acquiring practical wisdom which is subsequently disseminated.

Conclusion

This study offers a significant theoretical intervention by placing abstract *crip* theory in dialogue with the material realities of grassroots publishing, while highlighting the contributions of mad zines to disability peer support networks. Zines, owing to their democratic nature and lack of stringent rules regarding the form, modalities and content, provide mad positive spaces where radical ideas on mental health are circulated, *psy* discourses are challenged, and coalitions are formed. The process of zinemaking has proven to be political and therapeutic for many and has led to the creation of tightly knit communities, while interacting with zines inspires the readers to feel less alone and less isolated. The process of making zines is not dictated by external pressures, and the lack of archiving often affords the makers the freedom to create without the worry of future censure. Zines function at these junctures as *crip* doulas, with the non-medicalised experiential knowledge assisting and comforting those stepping into disabled or mad identities, which often go beyond or against the dominant psychiatric frameworks.

Through the analysis of chosen zines, this paper has demonstrated how the medium is used by the survivors of psychiatric systems to record their dissent, to bring out the broader socio-cultural determinants of mental health, and to expose the alliance between biopsychiatry and late-stage capitalism, while some others have utilised zines to teach harm minimisation and to provide helpful

tips to survive psychotic episodes. Mental illness stereotypes are also challenged through these mad zines. Furthermore, the selected zines engage in prefigurative politics, envisioning through their pages a future with mad identities acknowledged as integral parts of human diversity and a future in which mental difference is assimilated through the abolition of disabling barriers.

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