Ex-centric Writing
Ex-centric Writing:
Essays on Madness in Postcolonial Fiction

Edited by

Susanna Zinato and Annalisa Pes
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INTRODUCTION

SUSANNA ZINATO AND ANNALISA PES

The essays collected in this volume are derived from papers delivered at an International Colloquium entitled *Ex-centric Writing: Madness in Postcolonial Fiction in English* that we convened in Verona on 1-2 December 2011 under the aegis of Dipartimento di Lingue e Letterature Straniere of Verona University. The colloquium gave senior and junior members of our Department an important opportunity to meet internationally and nationally recognized scholars in the field of postcolonial studies and to be engaged in stimulating and critical conversations on the topics of madness, alienation, eccentricity in postcolonial literatures. By privileging the small-scale dimension of the colloquium we aimed exactly at creating the suitable conditions for an in-depth exploration and exchange of perspectives and interrogations.

Whenever approached, the time-honoured theme of madness conjures up a site where the converging discourses of psychiatry, psychoanalysis, anthropology, literature, philosophy, politics, social history find a common arena. As a literary theme it is dealt with in a wide range of critical and scholarly studies, many of them grappling with problems of definition. The nature of schizophrenia has been a particularly controversial ground of debate, especially in the 1960s and '70s with psychiatrists and psychologists who considered it as a valid, meaningful concept and, on the opposite front of anti-psychiatry, those who stated it was a figment of psychiatric imagination, the “sacred symbol” of Western society’s guilt.

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complex. Actually, as pointed out, among others, by S.L. Gilman (1988), categories of insanity such as schizophrenia, or hysteria should be addressed in the full awareness of their historically- and culturally-constructed nature.

But, perhaps, a most heated debate that cannot be overlooked here, as it closely involves literary studies on the subject, is that developed more than forty years ago between Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. Foucault’s aim, in his epoch-making *Histoire de la folie à l’âge classique* (1961), was to show how philosophy, psychology, and psychiatry, in fact the history of Western society, had proceeded on a radical *méconnaissance* (misreading) of the language of madness following on the Cartesian assumption of insanity’s incompatibility with thought and with truth. Being mad, i.e., not being able to think, amounts to non-being. Madness is silenced and exiled and Foucault’s archaeology of this silence cannot but encroach upon the thorny issue of whether we can ‘think’ the Other as such, i.e. as Subject, without objectifying it, of whether a discourse made by madness, not *about* madness, can exist at all. Derrida’s famous answer was that the “praise of folly” can only be made in the language of reason, “dans le langage de la fiction”. Soshana Felman, in her seminal *La Folie et la chose littéraire* rehearses the debate and in turn asks questions that are implied but not raised by the two *philosophes*: why is literature entrusted with the task of telling madness? What kind of relationship is there between madness and “the language of fiction”?

The answer she appears to give is

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2 Cp. T.S. Szasz, *Schizophrenia: The Sacred Symbol of Psychiatry* (1976) and the captivating *The Myth of Mental Illness* (1960) in which the rise of institutional psychiatry is made equal to a witch-hunt. As one of the major representatives – together with R. Laing and D. Cooper in Great Britain, and M. Foucault, F. Guattari and G. Deleuze in France – of the anti-psychiatry movement of the 1960’s, Szasz radically rejected the validity of the concept of mental illness, indicting ‘civilization’ itself as the precipitant of emotional instability and alienation in the most vulnerable. The consequences of extending the word ‘civilization’ to ‘colonization’ are all too evident.

3 The starting point of the debate was Michel Foucault’s *Folie et déraison. Histoire de la folie à l’âge classique* (1961). Derrida developed his critique of Foucault’s enterprise in “Cogito et histoire de la folie”, included in his influential *L’écriture et la différence* (1967). Foucault, in turn, contested Derrida’s interpretation of Descartes’s hypothesis of madness (*Meditation*) in *Mon corps. Ce papier, ce feu*, the second appendix to the 1972 Gallimard edition of *Histoire de la folie*.

that both languages resist final interpretations, both ask us to listen to their
textual modes of working. The fundamental point of divergence between
the two languages, finally, lies in “the rhetorical mastery of its own fictive
madness or of its own madness (in a deconstructive view) that qualifies
literary discourse” (Zinato 1999, 23).

While bearing Felman’s considerations on literary madness in mind
and treasuring them as a valuable heritage of Western theory on the
subject, our volume’s vocation is to gauge the difference one is faced with
when a postcolonial ex-centric text is addressed. In Fanonian terms the
colonial experience and its aftermath do not only interrogate the binary
opposition of “sanity” and “insanity” but, above all, they confront us with
the question of what happened to the very notion of the human as endorsed
and advocated by Western Humanism (Butler 2006).

The concern with place/displacement, with identity and belonging, is
a major feature of postcolonial literature and the theme of alienation
cannot but be ‘topical’ in the literatures of the countries that have
experienced the cultural shock and bereavement, and the physical and
psychic trauma of colonial invasion. While giving contextual specifics
their due, one may assert that the ex-centric experience/vision of reality
always distorts and makes the allegedly ‘central’ representation of reality
strange/estranging. When perceived through the anamorphic lens of
madness, the theme of alienation is magnified and charged with an
excruciatingly questioning and destabilizing power, laying bare political,
as well as existential and moral, urges. It is from the ex-centric, broadly
exilic or displaced position that the ideology and practice of colonialism –
as, exemplarily, in the case of Apartheid – demands to be rubricated under
the sign of psychopathology. More broadly, in fiction the freak or mad
character’s ex-centric vision is a continuous warning against the
temptation to believe in those discourses that pass themselves off as
reflecting or bearing the given, ‘natural’, order of things.

Unsurprisingly, the formal ‘order’ of the ex-centric text typology is
unfailingly ‘dis-ordered’. And here it is worth emphasizing that a crucial
implication of the above-mentioned debate qualified “for literature” by
Felman, is that, while maintaining that true madness cannot produce
rhetorically cohesive texts, it urges criticism to treat literary ex-centric
works as works of literature, works of art beyond any reductive application
of biographical/autobiographical sources. As brilliantly put by Colm
Hogan “we do not think we have explained Leopold Bloom when we

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3 Cp. S. Zinato, The House is Empty (1999) where the debate here briefly outlined
is expounded and contextualized.
identify Alfred Hunter as Joyce’s prototype. We should be as little inclined to such reductionism when interpreting the works of non-whites and women” (Hogan 1994, 98). Not incidentally the postcolonial canon comprises outstanding lunatic texts that are quintessentially experimental, and often make a challenging use of both modernist and surrealist Western techniques as well as of native traditions. A good case in point is given by the motif of the female body’s fragmentation in Southern African roman fou as analysed by Flora Veit-Wild who explores elements of resistance and female unruliness in tales from African folklore originally meant to uphold the patriarchal order (Veit-Wild 2006, 108-126).

The discourse on the body is actually one of the main routes through which the theme of madness is tackled in literary texts, especially in the postcolonial context over-determined by racialization. Veit-Wild herself, in her introduction to Writing Madness: Borderlines of the Body in African Literature, points out that “writing madness is, on a broader level, related to the paradigm of writing the body, to what [she] understand[s] as ‘the borderlines of the body’” (2006, 3). The large currency of the approach to literary madness through the body has been recently confirmed in Postcolonial Fiction and Disability by Clare Barker who, while acknowledging the extensive discussions of the body in the examination of (post)colonial cultural and literary texts, objects that in such discussions disabled bodies tend to be dealt with on over-generalizing grounds of race and colonization, flattening out contextual differences (Barker 2011, 16, 26). Other paths leading to the trope of madness are those concerned with gender/trans-gender or childhood in postcolonial literature. However, to date, critical contributions (mainly articles and book chapters) directly tackling the subject of madness in postcolonial fiction have tended to concentrate on individual areas (first Africa, then in a descending order of frequency, the Caribbean, Asia, the settler colonies, the Pacific) or on individual works by certain writers (Jean Rhys, Erna Brodber, Janet Frame, Bessie Head, Dambudzo Marechera, Tsitsi Dangarembga, A.A Aidoo, A.K. Armah, Buchi Emecheta, to name just a few). Understandably so, we believe, considering the difficulties in reconciling the width of scope with the depth offered by special competence. Texts like the above-mentioned Flora Veit-Wild’s Writing Madness or Letizia Gramaglia’s Representations of Madness in Indo-Caribbean Literature (PhD thesis 2008, Warwick University) work towards such an aim but within the scope of a restricted area.

6 On the affinities between modernism, modernity and madness see L. Sass, Madness and Modernism (1992).
As a matter of fact the present volume has no claim to inclusiveness and our use of the word “essays” in the title, an addition to the conference title, is aimed at alerting the reader against expecting any exhaustive coverage of all the areas of the postcolonial world. The contributions included in this collection are concerned with writers from Southern Africa, the Caribbean, Australia, the Indian subcontinent and Asian diaspora(s) in accordance with the authors’ research interests. However, this focalization has hardly been an obstacle to wider-ranging reflections on the issue of postcolonial inflections of madness in literature, as witnessed by the rich and fruitful discussions originated by the colloquium papers. Therefore we hope this collection will turn out to be a useful addition to the field.

In the meantime, much has been written in the fields of anthropology, (ethno-)psychiatry and social history applied to the colonial contexts, to such an extent that it is not uncommon for literary critics working on colonial/postcolonial madness to digress into these disciplines in order to get at reliable historical records and receive assistance in facing the inescapable problems of cultural translation. If psychoanalysis has not always enjoyed the favour of many postcolonial theorists on the grounds of its Euro-centric, conservative and even still colonial assumptions⁷, the social history of psychiatry and ethno-psychiatry has never ceased to provide literary critics with useful antidotes against the narcissism of some theoretical paradigms. Through their interrogation of the issues of madness and its treatment in European colonies and their investigations into the psychology of colonial domination, outstanding scholars in British and French history of colonial psychiatry have literally helped to re-think our understanding of madness as related to colonialism/postcolonialism. Assumptions governing classic studies on madness in literature in a Western context often need to be corrected and revised when transferred and ‘translated’ into a postcolonial context. For example, Waltraud Ernst (1996) and, in his wake, more recently, Indrani Sen (2005) make clear that Elaine Showalter’s classic study on female madness (1987) turns out to be useless for the study of European female mental health in British India. Generally speaking, historians like Megan Vaughan (1991), Lynnette Jackson (1993), Jock McCulloch (1995), Jonathan Sadowsky (1999), as far as Africa is concerned, and again Waltraud Ernst (1991) as regards India, among others, are to be held as crucial readings towards an explanation of the ways in which Western medicine cooperated with

colonial authority to facilitate its rule, by providing scientific justifications for racist policies and by using asylums as key-symbols of their civilizing mission.

As argued by Caitlin Murray (2007), Australian medical literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries drew a picture of Aboriginal insanity that, while disrupting traditional oppositions between madness and reason, maintained hierarchies based on race. Medical interpretations, filtered through racial classification, by renowned psychiatrists like Dr Norton Manning, Dr John Bostock, and Dr C.A. Hogg, starting from the assumption that Aboriginal cerebral structures were primitive and undeveloped in contrast with the highly evolved white brain, held that Aboriginal insanity was simpler and less developed in comparison with the multifaceted and sophisticated white mental disease which helped discard its negative taint. As Bostock’s presentation at the Australasian Medical Congress held in Melbourne in 1923 writes: “[Aboriginal] emotions as shown by his insanities are of the crude or “all or nothing” thalamic pattern. There is mania and melancholia, but the varying lights and shades and half tones of the white are missing” (Murray 2007, 8). Prior to Bostock, Dr Manning had pointed out at the 1889 Intercolonial Medical Congress that before the arrival of Europeans insanity was extremely rare among Aboriginal people in their “primitive and uncivilised condition” (Murray 2007, 11). The concept of madness itself was therefore racialized by medical narratives which distinguished between “different colours” of madness and nourished the image of Aboriginal people as underdeveloped beings caught in a modern world they could not comply with and this ‘racialization’ was used to justify the existence of a civilized (even when mad) white Australian society and of colonization as a natural process towards a Darwinian survival of the fittest.

Largely absent in most of Africa during the 19th century, psychiatrists of British and French schools developed a very strong interest in the “African mind” publishing widely on “indigenous psychopathology”. The fascination with the deculturalizing effects and with the definition of a specifically “African insanity”, however, took into no account linguistic and cultural differences and was ruled by a program for classifying and subjecting, rather than healing, African patients. For instance, literary readings may certainly find it helpful to know that medical and psychological language was commonly employed by colonial rulers in Africa to label dissent, to psychiatrically dismiss collective ‘manias’ as well as various rebellious types in society that often had the shape of [poll-tax evading!] prophets and visionaries preaching against local Europeans,
but “were diagnosed as epileptic, neurotic, or suffering from ‘religious mania’” (Mahone 2006, 241ff.). A mere survey of colonial/imperial anthropological sources concerning the African continent has led Uzo Esonwanne to the following reflection, that may possibly be extended to other colonial contexts: “Far from being the serenely passive object of the investigating I/eye, Africa is the energizing foundation of anthropology. As the maddening topos of irrationality […] Africa is the sine qua non of anthropology. It is not, therefore, Africa, that needs anthropology.” (Esonwanne 1990-91, 121).

In colonial psychiatry the psychology of the native immediately coincides with psychopathology. Suffice it to bear in mind the racist theories expounded by (in-)famous ethno-psychiatrists like Antoine Porot, Don Côme Arii, Jean M. Sutter, and, above all, by South African John Colin Dixson Carothers to realize how their un-scrupled judgements were founded on racist biology and pathological anatomy. Carothers’s ethno-psychiatric theses (published by WHO in 1953 and still in print in 1970) spread the idea of biological and cultural inferiority of Africans on the basis of his observations of a supposed inferior development of their brain’s frontal lobes (Keller 2001, 308).

This is the theoretical scenario of the 1950s met by Frantz Fanon in his formative years and it is exactly against the scientific racism of a psychiatry/ethno-psychiatry so unmistakably compliant with the colonial project that he will most vociferously react. All the above-mentioned postcolonial scholarly sources (Sadowsky in particular) consider Fanon’s thought and practice as the real turning point in the field, usefully suggesting how the historiography of colonial psychiatry can revise existing understandings of colonial/post-colonial history and psychology and, thus, demanding the attention of any critical approach to madness in postcolonial literary texts. In this regard, it may be interesting to observe that a recent collection of psychiatrist studies focused on subjectivity in the former colonies, *Postcolonial Disorders* (Delvecchio et al. 2007), still employs as its presiding thesis the Fanonian view of colonialism as scarring the psyche of the colonized with long-lasting effects that manifest themselves in the postcolony in terms of traumatic memory and alienation. As underlined by Ziauddin Sardar, “*Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) was the first book to investigate the psychology of colonialism”, to examine “how colonialism is internalized by the colonized, how an inferiority complex is inculcated, and how, through the mechanism of racism, black people end up emulating their oppressors” (Sardar 2008, 10) in search of identity recognition from the Prosperos of the Empire. The urgency of Fanon’s emphasis on the epidermalization process and the ego collapse
suffered by the colonized still engages us. The foundational role of Fanon as a thought-provoking source of inspiration and debate in the postcolonial field is made all too evident by the chapter devoted to him in *The Postcolonial Unconscious* (2011) by Neil Lazarus, the latest major, if polemical, reconstruction of postcolonial studies. Lazarus gives as an uncontroversial truth the fact that: “the work of Frantz Fanon served as a central note of focus, discussion and dispute in the institutionalization and consolidation of postcolonial studies during the 1980s and 1990s” (Lazarus 2011, 161). The extent to which Fanon’s thought can still help us understand the grim de-humanizing realities of today’s world, as they are evoked in postcolonial, diasporic literature of alienation, is emphasized among others by Wallerstein (2009), in whose assessment Fanon’s reflections on violence and the assertion of identity are still cogent nowadays. Therefore, the recurrent evocation of Fanon in most essays collected here should not come as a surprise.

In “The Shot Tower: History, Autre-biography and Madness in *The Master of Petersburg*” **DAVID ATTWELL** leads us through an insightful, vertiginous journey into one of the most enigmatic of Coetzee’s novels, *The Master of Petersburg* (1994), a fictionalization of a period in the life and work of Dostoevsky.

The tenth chapter of *The Master* recounts a confrontation that occurs at the top of the city’s shot tower between Dostoevsky and Nechaev, the revolutionary nihilist with whom the Russian novelist’s deceased stepson, Pavel Isaev, was associated. A legacy of 19th-century industrialism in Britain and in the States, placed by the South African novelist on Stolyarny Quay in St. Petersburg, in its apparent incongruity this tower, put exactly in the middle of the novel, throws its long shadow over the whole of it, iconically standing for Coetzee’s disturbing intrusions in the record. These intrusions, suggesting the presence of an auto-biographical sub-text — as here proposed by Attwell —, turn the tower into a sort of paradoxical lighthouse intermittently bringing the personal tragedy of the author’s son’s premature death and his presence in the folds of the narrative.

Going through ambiguous, metaleptic knots of biography (Dostoevsky’s), autobiography (Coetzee’s), fictionalization of historical facts and self-fictionalization, Attwell skillfully makes us aware of how Coetzee succeeds in “enclosing his creativity in the creativity of [Feodor Mikhailovic Dostoevsky].” Nicholai Stavrogin, the lead character in Dostoevsky’s *The Possessed*, and Pavel Isaev, in Coetzee’s fiction the Russian author’s stepson, are called to incarnate the South African novelist’s son back into
life without dispelling the shadows surrounding his life to his father, respecting, as it were, what was and is bound to remain unknown about him.

Coetzee uncannily resorts to the literary and biographical record of Dostoevsky’s writing *The Possessed* as, in the critic’s words, his own pretext “for a new form of writing whose purpose was to transmute the son into life on the page.” The question of whether there is something redemptive in the attempt is left, actually, open in the text, as well as in Attwell’s reading. When the critic shows Coetzee to proceed by continuously inventing and revising plot situations “in order to release different […] outcomes,” we are brought to wonder whether this is done, also, in order to subtract his son to Stavrogin’s (suicidal) ending and to commit him to Pavel’s possibly accidental yet mysterious falling to death from the shot tower. In so doing, Coetzee merges the existential and the aesthetic in very complex, subtle ways, that support and illuminate each other and that enable the fictional stepfather/biological father – Dostoevsky/Coetzee – to exorcise the maddening, unhealable grief at his stepson/son’s life being tragically cut short and at their difficult relationship being left inconclusive, suspended, perhaps unreconciled.

Madness is all the time made resonant through the par-excellence Dostoevskyan theme of possession, the descent into obscenity, the writer’s demonic possession, and, in particular, through a form of derangement finally longed-for by Coetzee from within his text, one capable of turning “falling” into “flying”, “even if a flying as slow and old and clumsy as a turtle’s” (Coetzee 1994, 235). Perhaps this melancholic mad flying may be thought of as a way to face bereavement by shunning mourning which, in any case, is “a kind of betrayal, the second killing of the (lost) object”, as a way, that is, to remain “faithful to the lost object, refusing to renounce his attachment.” (Žižek 2000, 660).

CARMEN CONCILIO’s essay, “In the Heart of the Country: From Novel to Film. An Economy of Madness”, keeps the focus of attention turned on Coetzee’s art in proposing a close reading of Magda, the protagonist of Coetzee’s *In the Heart of the Country* (1976), more precisely of her ex-centricity, or of her “economy of madness” both as a producer of her own textuality and as a character in the film *Dust* (1985) by the Belgian director Marion Hänsel. As it is to be expected from Coetzee, Magda definitely is an a-typical colonial white madwoman. She may even not be taken as really insane; however, she certainly advocates madness as her vantage point to disclose, in Concilio’s own words, “the neurosis and psychopathology of the colony which is in turn a political and economic discourse […] about power, property, hierarchy, money,
language, and gender.” In point of fact, Magda’s insular condition, while deriving from the patriarchal exclusion of her agency, is also cultivated and vindicated as her badge of (sane?) difference.

Concilio elects as fil rouge of her essay exactly the economic and, necessarily, political import of Magda’s ex-centricity, translated into her exclusion from any colonial economic circuit, including the circuit of desire (as love is unknown here), by putting it squarely as “coterminous” with the colonial potentate that has in the farm a most important infrastructure. In the light of Achille Mbembe’s definition of the colonial potentate, in fact, Concilio examines all these economic circuits from Magda’s position, remarking how she is totally excluded from them or unfailingly found unfit for them. Measuring herself against them she cannot but define herself as a “lack”, a “hole” (resonating with Lacanian implications).

In comparing the novel with the film Dust it is exactly this “economy of madness” that Concilio finds played down in the latter, in favour of an emphasis on the issue of femininity, on Magda’s questioning of her subjectivity and agency as a woman in colonial conditions. However, in spite of its partial success in adapting the novel, Concilio holds that the film maintains a powerful force in suggesting the dichotomies, the binarisms, but, also, the claustrophobic entrapment in which Magda is caught. In the symmetrical circulation of goods and desires, in the pre-monetary giving and taking characterizing the potentate system – in which the rules of service and payment, gift and debt contaminate even those subordinated to it – asymmetry and entropy are triggered off when the patriarch (he, of all)'s desire bypasses his own codes and breaks the colour bar. In the collapse of this economic-political system following on her father’s infringement, Magda stands out in all her lucid madness that, in its torrential, if seemingly uncohesive, dis-ordered speech, points towards a different way of living in Africa for whites. Through her madness, be it real or the label she has been given for not being “of their stuff” (Coetzee 1976, 10), she is entitled to point at a different, ‘anti-economic’ and reciprocal way for the whites to live in Africa with Africans. The farm collapses but Magda is so wisely ‘mad’ as not to mourn for it, not even run away from it. Her words can close this presentation much better than ours: “We are the castaways of God as we are the castaways of history […] I for one do not wish to be at the centre of the world, I wish only to be at home in the world as the merest beast is at home.” (Coetzee 1976, 135)

Still remaining in the Southern African context (South Africa, Botswana), SUSANNA ZINATO’s essay tackles a by-now ‘classic’ of ex-centric writing, A Question of Power (1974) by Bessie Head and
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proposes a reading of the descent into madness of its coloured protagonist Elizabeth as a devastating epic confrontation with abjection that finally leads her to a lyric celebration of ordinariness.

Firstly, Zinato qualifies how the genre categories of ‘epic’ and ‘lyric’ are employed in the essay through a fruitful weaving of a dialogue with David Attwell’s application of them to the Black Consciousness movement of the ’60s and the ’70s and, primarily, to the “Soweto poet” Mongane Serote (Attwell 2005). Subsequently, the notion of abjection as psychoanalytically developed by Julia Kristeva in her seminal *Powers of Horror* (1982) is closely applied not, as in some criticism on the novel, as a trope, though powerful (usually insisting on the border-trespassing motif), i.e. not figuratively but literally and structurally, as a hermeneutically necessary tool for an in-depth, admittedly tough, understanding of the nature and import of Elizabeth’s madness. Kristeva’s notion of “true-real” is also resorted to in the attempt to define the a-symbolic and metonymic semiosis characterizing the hallucinated stage of Elizabeth’s nightmare. Besides Kristeva’s, Frantz Fanon’s voice is called to counterpoint the argumentative texture of the essay throughout. The reasons for his cohesive presence in this analysis of *A Question of Power* are given – last but not least the striking affinity between Head’s and Fanon’s philosophical-existential and political vision.

Coloured Elizabeth, single mother, independent, and educated is a source of abjection for whites as much as for blacks; her hybrid body is the incarnate icon of contamination. She does not belong anywhere, her madness is polluting. At the same time, an intimation offered by the novel is that the fear of contamination may very well be of Elizabeth, too, through internalization of deep-seated, visceral racist feelings, so that she can be said to be a subject of, as well as, to abjection, in need of purging her self through a process of ‘self-abjection’, as it were.

Abjection is physically, psychically, and socially/ideologically magnified and ‘practised’ in racism, being at the core of the apartheid system; yet, in Head’s novel racism is given as one, though exemplarily dehumanizing, version of Exclusive Power that feeds on the psychical, sexual, moral, and political humiliation of the ab-jected and that ‘speaks’ through the obscenity inhabiting the novel through multiple inflections. Violence and death pervade its epic scene, especially in connection with sex. To her demons’ eyes, Elizabeth’s alleged racial and linguistic (she “does not speak any African language”) inferiority is matched and conveyed by her sexual stigma. The role played by language in this confrontation between abjection and “decency” is given by Zinato due emphasis, and is enhanced in a Fanonian light.
The critic is keen on highlighting Head’s experimental courage (effective examples of which may be found in her textual rendering of mad Elizabeth’s inability to symbolize or of her body dismemberment and hollowing-out of the self) and connects it to her creative risk-taking, a powerful formal correlative of her will to belief.

Elizabeth’s appeal to treasuring ordinariness – that the critic does not fail to discuss in anticipatory connection with Ndebele’s famous call to a “rediscovery of the ordinary” – involves embracing an ethic of finitude resonating with emotional and political tension and shunning any comfortable ethical self-sufficiency in favour of a lucidly disillusioned knowledge. However this hard-won knowledge does not lead her to a pessimistic closure. Her existential and political “poetics” of ordinariness is lyrically given as the antidote to abjection, especially systematized abjection. If, on the one hand, Elizabeth’s survival is not to be taken for granted and offers no glib reassuring ending, still, *A Question of Power* can be said to share in a Fanonian-inflected “epic of futurity” in its urge to reclaim a new humanism.

With “Political Parenthood and Natural Daugh therhood: Rosa Burger’s Alienation(s)”, ANGELO RIGHETTI focuses our attention on the alienation/s suffered by the protagonist of Nadine Gordimer’s *Burger’s Daughter* (1979). Rosa, who is first and foremost her father’s daughter, appears to exist almost exclusively in a filial role over-determined by History and politics, her parents being white liberal activists totally devoted to the anti-apartheid cause. Righetti highlights the captivating but difficult cohabitation in the narrative of a feminine *Bildungsroman* and the range of a historical novel with the contradictory claims of biography and autobiography and keenly shows how effective it is as a formal correlative of the throes Rosa must go through in an “individuation process” that cannot rely on a natural, loving, filial connection.

History, in the guise of political commitment, has fixated the Burgers’ family relationships, locking Rosa in a double bind: she must either be faithful to the political individuation decided on her by her parents’ brave but highly demanding choices involving emotional and sexual self-effacement, or satisfy her legitimate need for self-individuation and confront – alongside with the pain of appealing to the resources of natural daughterhood that she has been denied – the search for emotional and bodily awareness, i.e. full womanhood.

Righetti’s subtle analysis penetrates Rosa’s alienating Spältung, her fighting against the ‘blackmail’ of her filial in-bred political duties and her guilt-ridden wish to appropriate ‘her’ self – a wish that has always been frustrated by her father’s cumbersome historical vocation and that
reverberates on the contrasting claims of biography (her parents’) and autobiography. Only material detachment, and her father’s death, will make it possible for her to heal her split personality when, turning away the prospect of personal happiness as a result of “defecting” and staying away from South Africa, she decides to follow in the parental track of political engagement but in her own, totally low-profile and un-heroic way according to her “self-addressed” commandment that, in aversion to ideology, will embrace the practice of ubuntu (human heartedness) by teaching Soweto black youths wounded or disabled by the riot police, to walk again.

Moving from Africa to the Caribbean JOHN THIEME discusses in his essay “Becoming a Madman, Becoming a Madwoman: Ex-centric Psychologies in Caribbean Literature” a comparatively wide range of Anglophone and Francophone Caribbean works. The critic starts by considering madness, in Foucauldian terms, as a culturally constructed condition, associated to colonial and postcolonial fabrications of normality and he argues that the dissociated Caribbean psyche presented in Anglophone texts is the result of a disruptive combination of colonial European education and African traditions: two conflicting value-systems that afflict Caribbean colonial subjects with cultural schizophrenia and with the Fanonian internalization of a sense of inferiority. The Anglophone texts chosen by Thieme, Walcott’s *Dream on Monkey Mountain* (1970), Erna Brodber’s *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home* (1980) and Lovelace’s *Salt* (1996), all envisage the process of mental decolonization as a progress towards sanity, in which a fundamental role in defying madness instilled by colonialism is played by the community and the predominance of popular culture over metropolitan norms. If in Walcott’s psychodrama, the critic observes, all characters in St Lucia, with no distinction of class, race and colour, feature dissociated psyches as a consequence of colonial domination, in Erna Brodber’s novel it is Jamaican women’s nervous condition that comes to the fore. Nonetheless, in both works the protagonists have to shape their fragmented self by making sense of incompatible cultural strands and by dismissing the legacies of both Europe and Africa as a Eurocentric construction – a process that makes them accept Caribbean past and folk traditions as their Home. The same emphasis on colonial education system as a cause of madness is to be found in Earl Lovelace’s *Salt* where, as Thieme maintains, a challenge to the dissociation brought on by colonial values is given by the communal unity of the different ethnic groups in Trinidad. By setting his story during the Trinidadian nationalist phase when the PNM was in power, Lovelace assesses the possibility of an historical and psychological
reconciliation of the multifarious Creole identities, never taking it for
granted though, through the recuperation of a submerged popular culture
and an egalitarian national unity that, even while respecting diversities and
individualities, might bring a fragmented social psyche together.

The Francophone texts Thieme takes into consideration are less
optimistic. Martinican Patrick Chamoiseau’s *Chronicle of the Seven
Sorrows* (*Chronique des sept misères*) (1986), sharing in part the
Anglophone writers’ vision of community, makes use of the collective
narrative voice of the extinguishing traditional Martinican figures of the
djobeurs. By means of a wandering narrative (itself a challenge, according
to Thieme, to conventional notions of normality) these folk figures,
repository of old values, tell stories of ex-centric behavior induced by the
post-World War II modernization and assimilationist policies introduced
after the conferral of DOM status on Martinique in 1946. What
Chamoiseau suggests is that the interference from metropolitan France
after World War II caused the loss of cultural autonomy that had instead
been granted to Martinique before, even under French colonial rule, and
that the resulting conflict between two value-systems generated various
forms of madness. What Thieme evinces from his analysis is that if in the
Anglophone texts this same cultural schizophrenia was being healed
through a process of mental decolonization, this solution appears less
possible in Chamoiseau. A different focalization characterizes Gisèle
madness and alienation are the result of an incestuous patriarchal culture
in Guadalupe that renders the novel’s female protagonists, traumatized by
abusive incest and natural catastrophes, exiles at home. As Thieme claims,
the issue of violation at home condemns the women in the novel to
maddening isolation and silent suffering, thus emphasizing the idea of the
failure of the family. The only way out is provided by female bonding, by
a mutually sustaining community where “I” becomes “We”, a new version
of the concept of family, destroyed during the period of slavery by the
cutting off of kinship ties. Thieme’s articulate and rich analysis closes on
the trilogy of Marie Vieux-Chauvet’s Haitian novellas, *Love, Anger,
Madness* (*Amour, Colère, Folie*) (1968) that, being set during authoritarian
regimes (an allegory of contemporary Duvalier’s dictatorship in Haiti),
appear more gloomy and pessimistic than the works previously taken into
account, to the point that the cultural split and psychic dissociation of
these characters determine a condition with no way out. In his analysis
Thieme focuses on the relation between madness and poetic creativity
(“Madness”) as a means to oppose the brutality of the despotic regime, and
on madness associated to an internalized negative view of women’s
sexuality, complicit with the assertion of tyrannical power ("Anger") and repressed by social imperatives of upper-class Catholic upbringing ("Love").

Thieme concludes by considering that in both Anglophone and Francophone texts community and folk traditions are the only weapons to get over the madness of colonialism, although the postcolonial perpetuation of political control depicted in the Francophone novels makes this process more difficult. Gender politics in the characterization of male and female madness are instead very similar in both contexts: communal bonding appears more possible in male texts whilst it is only hoped for in female ones where women tend to live in isolation although a communal awareness can be perceived.

Holding the attention turned on Caribbean literature, with the essay ""Step[ping] over the Threshold into Otherness": Representations of Insanity in Roger Mais’s First Novel” FRANCESCA SCALINCI chooses to explore the many facets of madness in The Hills Were Joyful Together (1953), the first published novel of Jamaican Roger Mais, shedding due light on the complexity of Mais’s work, hardly known outside the circle of Caribbean literature scholars. Through a critical reading of the text, the essay closely follows two characters’ descent into madness, effectively illustrating the ways in which alienation is depicted both as a product of social injustice and (post)colonial uncertainty, and as a mode of ex-centric escape from the fragmentation of the self and from an ontological condition of misery and loneliness.

Scalinci contextualises the novel by offering a necessarily brief, though useful, overview of Jamaican history in the early decades of the 20th century and examines the intersection between Mais’s writing and political commitment, between socialism, anti-colonialism and literary realism. In this light, the characters’ falling into madness can be read, from a sociogenic perspective, as one of the many consequences of poverty, decay and bad working conditions. In a broad view, these can in turn be interpreted as the result of slavery and colonialism, of the Middle Passage and its aftermath. If it is true, as emphasized by Fanon, that the black man’s alienation is never to be addressed as an individual question, Mais’s social realism perfectly discloses the social and historical roots of such a condition. At the same time, Scalinci discourages a deterministic and exclusively socio-realistic interpretation of madness as portrayed in the novel because if, on the one hand, characters are condemned by history and their social environment, on the other hand, it is the human ‘race’ itself that, in Mais’s vision, appears as inherently doomed to failure. It is exactly their ex-centric perception of reality, Scalinci argues, that enables
Mais’s characters to see the ontological loneliness and misery of the human condition, therefore vesting them with the oracular qualities of the shaman.

Scalinci is keen on highlighting how Mais’s departure from naturalism becomes stylistically and formally visible. As evidenced by the carefully chosen passages included in the essay, the presence of a third-person narrator does not prevent the reader from being plunged in the syncopated rhythms of the characters’ thought flow, rendered through syntactical interruptions and suspensions. More importantly, as she remarks, the experimental quality of the novel owes much to Mais’s use of the impersonal choric interludes, of a dense symbolic imagery drawn from the many diverse traditions informing the Caribbean experience, and to his employ of the interior monologue.

DAVID CALLAHAN’s essay “‘Admirable people, though limited’: On Not Submitting in Australian Literature” opens the section devoted to Australia by investigating madness through a wide-ranging survey of texts in Australian literature and focusing on different rejections of Australia’s ‘reasonableness’. Callahan maintains that the so-called “reasonable life” has been traditionally identified as a frustrating feature of Australian culture and by referring to the authoritative example of Patrick White’s The Aunt’s Story (1948) he mentions the protagonist’s apparently senseless decision at the end of the novel to get off a train in the United States, on her way back to Australia, and to wander around making friends with real and imaginary people until she is taken to a psychiatric hospital. As Callahan suggests, Theodora’s refusal to go back to her home country represents her refusal to submit to it and to the reasonableness of the “admirable though limited” people whom her imaginary friend Holstius warns her against. But it is actually her escape from the Australian maddening suppression of eccentricity that is regarded as madness itself because, instead of conventionally escaping to the culturally rich Europe, Theodora chooses small-town America to stage her rejection.

Abiding by Horwitz’s interpretation of mental disorders as sane responses to traumatizing events, Callahan argues that the hysterical behavior of most allegedly mad characters in Australian literature can be regarded as a reasonable response to unbearable conditions, from transported convicts to Indigenous people for whom madness appears as a perfectly reasonable reaction to devastating violence, abuse, dispossession and murder. Among the various texts examined by Callahan Peter Carey’s monumental novel Oscar and Lucinda (1988) depicts the madness of the colonial enterprise as the combined result both of the brutality against First Peoples and of the upper-middle class self-centred desires as violently
carried out by the lower middle class. This very madness for possession and a secure home in Australia on the part of white settlers is the narrative focus of a huge number of novels and according to Callahan it seems to interpret the need for displaced colonists to recalibrate their center which is no more Europe nor yet Australia, so rejecting Australia for Europe is not rebellious at all, the real challenge being to find an ex-centric site to step into, as it is for Theodora’s America, although this is labeled as madness.

Callahan suggests that the principal hermeneutic attack on the centre is not one in which Europe figures as a rejected centre but one in which the centre has been redefined as Australia itself, thus ex-centricity operates in terms of writing back to Australia and not for or against Europe. But, as remarked by the critic, to locate Australia as the centre means admitting that what was once the centre of First peoples has been reclassified as nowhere: colonization in Australia has made everybody become ex-centric to their own lost centre. For this reason Callahan observes that First Peoples’ narratives can hardly display mad characters, on the contrary a succession of wise and sensible people recur, because the site of madness is already occupied by colonization. On the other hand, white Australian writers find it more difficult to create positive characters also for a sort of instilled shame which Callahan interprets in the light of Timothy Bewes’ (2011) perspective, i.e. shame derived from disorientation by what cannot be comprehended, namely their own history and belonging.

Referring to Marcus Clarke’s foundation novel *His Natural Life* (1870-72) Callahan observes how convictism was calculated to drive people to madness, but the insane were not the convicts, whose mental derangement was a perfectly reasonable consequence of the violence they were subjected to. The insane, instead, were those who exercised this violence upon them and upon the First Peoples, those who asserted sameness over difference, so that shame has become the lost home of white Australian writing and it is in the light of post-colonial shame that Clarke’s decision to give a second ending to his novel (the version reissued in book form) is to be interpreted. Continuing his examination of Australian literary history Callahan notices that if during the colonial period madness was associated with the desperate search for home by settlers, by mid-twentieth century Australia had become a home that was being abandoned for its restrictions on imagination and creative freedom, while America in this sense filled in a gap, as implied in the numerous novels he mentions where America becomes exemplary of the incommensurability of Australian history that cannot be a comfortable home for most of its inhabitants. Callahan concludes by contemplating the key role that First people writers can have.
in encouraging people to face up to their country’s past and present and to
sanely accept an Australian home as a mixture of peoples and of unfixed
and ex-centric identities.

Still dealing with the Australian setting, ANNALISA PES’s
“Damnation or Salvation? Journeys into Madness in Henry Lawson and
Patrick White’s Short Stories” investigates the representations of madness
in the short fiction of two Australian literary icons, considering them on
the background of the ambivalent historical and cultural specificities of a
(former) settler colony. In this context the issues of “place/displace-ment”,
“identity”, “otherness”, “belonging/un-belonging” are further problem-
atized by the destabilizing liminal position of a country trapped between
its filiative relationship with imperial power and its struggle to free itself
from the European legacy. Starting from the concept of displacement as a
centrifugal process ingrained in the history of Australia (convicts deported
from the centre of Empire to the Antipodes and Indigenous people
dislocated from their own centre to the margins) Pes argues that madness
as an ex-centric physical and psychic condition appears to be enrooted in
the Australian colonial past. Basing her analysis on the definition of critics
Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra of Australia as a “schizoid nation” with a
“doubled form of consciousness”(Hodge and Mishra 1990, xv), and
referring to the colonial ‘invention’ of the Australian place, Pes notices
that white Australian social, cultural and psychological identity can only
be conceived in terms of otherness and alienation. The recurrent literary
representations of dis-located identities can be considered as a strategy of
resistance to, and contestation of, a fixed centre of discursive and political
power, and as a means of re-appropriation of a marginalized identity
excluded from European hegemonic formations of the self.

In this light Pes observes how madness in both Lawson’s and White’s
stories becomes the metaphor for a problematic, non-conforming,
struggling identity that does not accept to be stereotyped into an
anonymous “Other”, thus acquiring the meaning of a subversion of the
“reasonable” and the “normative”. The world of imagination and folly in
which Lawson’s and White’s characters seek refuge in their mental
derangement represents indeed a challenge and a threat to the over-
emphasized importance given to rationality and pragmatism in the
construction of an Australian national, central, authority. Pes goes on
analyzing two of Henry Lawson’s most representative ‘studies’ of
madness, “Water Them Geraniums” and “The Bush Undertaker”, putting
emphasis on the link between madness and imagination and on the
disruptive and alienating effects the bush has on the lives and minds of
bushmen and bushwomen. The precarious mental state of the protagonists
of these stories can also be regarded as a form of punishment and expiation of the original sin of settling and, in particular, of the guilty nature of a penal colony. Lawson’s stories of madness thus “de-centre” the contemporary nationalist engagement with pragmatism and rationality and in the meanwhile present the bush as an ex-centric place of resistance.

When considering Patrick White’s stories, Pes focuses on two stories taken from White’s first collection *The Burnt Ones* (1964), “Clay” and “The Letters”, where the protagonists’ mental insanity appears as a form of ex-centric resistance to the power of oppressive social conventions, a sort of way out – a salvation, even if with marginalizing effects – from a fixed identity ascribed by a normative social set. Pes starts from the assumption that madness in White’s fiction seems to have a redeeming power against the sterility of a central bourgeois complacency and conformity and to provide his characters with a higher level of freedom and wisdom. The unwholesome relationship between mother and child, often to the fore in White’s fiction, is especially investigated as an allegory of an Australia that cannot completely cut the umbilical cord that ties her to Britain, not even after independence, and is therefore oppressed by the cultural authority of a Mother-country that prevents her from accomplishing the psychological passage from the periphery of the Empire to an independent centre.

With **ROSELLA CIOCCA**’s intense essay “Psychic Unease and Unconscious Critical Agency: For An Anatomy of Postcolonial Melancholy”, the focus of attention shifts on the postcolonial and postimperial inflections of time-honoured Melancholy. In a *largo movimento* that aptly concludes the present volume, its still engaging hermeneutical vitality is here measured in the wide hybridized Asian spectrum, through the novels of British Asian Monica Ali, British Caribbean Indian V.S. Naipaul, Canadian Asian Rohinton Mistry, and Cosmopolitan Indian Kiran Desai.

Tracing it back to the Western tradition, Ciocca reconstructs how Freud’s reformulation of melancholy as a pathological failure to mourn a loss, bringing the bereaved subject to an internalization of the lost object, marks a new terrain of possible appropriations, as evidenced by its successive reclamations by almost every poststructuralist theoretical trend and, more recently, by trauma and holocaust studies. So, not surprisingly, the Freudian notion of melancholy – especially, as usefully rehearsed by the critic, in the wake of Lacan’s, Kristeva’s, Judith Butler’s and Abraham and Torok’s integrations of it – has been interrogated and appropriated by postcolonial studies interested in the collective and transgenerational psychical experiences of deprivation and bereavement.
By referring to Fanon’s investigation into the psychic unease and damages caused by colonization Ciocca observes the colonized/colonial subject’s loss of identity and dignity following on his/her racialization and the melancholic syndrome developed out of it in Naipaul’s *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987) and in Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), considering them in the light of the interpretation of memory as a painful re-membering of a dismembered past. Through the writer’s alter-ego in the first case and, in the second, through Jemubhai Patel, the old judge nostalgic of the Imperial Civil Service, Freudian and Fanonian notes may be heard to resonate both in the atavistic/transgenerational specters of shame and deprivation haunting their ever-present sense of inadequacy and placelessness and in their profound painful state of dejection. The judge’s paradoxical nostalgia for the Empire’s good old times most effectively tells of the void left that has to be mourned/elaborated from both sides of the colonial divide.

That much work is still to be done on the British side of the divide is the object of the following part of the essay where, elaborating on Paul Gilroy’s reflections in *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* (2004), Britain’s inability to elaborate its loss of empire, and its rejection of responsibility for its crimes, is seen to tragically cohabit with the difficult-to-mourn losses that affect the lives of asylum-seekers, refugees, clandestine migrants, constantly in exile and in flight, whose subjectivities appear irreparably maimed. Here, Anglo-Bengali Monica Ali’s *In the Kitchen* (2010) is approached by Ciocca as “a sort of state-of-the-nation novel” that offers itself to the reader as a dramatic traumascape of psychic devastation and alienation. In the novel two different settings are contrasted: on the one hand, the multi-cultural/national/confessional kitchen of the once splendid *Imperial Hotel* (an all too evident metonymy for the whole nation) where a melting pot crew intertwines stories of war, migration, violence leading to damaged consciousness and psychic alienation; on the other hand, a northern village of ex-millworkers who lament the loss of a cohesive cultural and ethnic community with what Ciocca sees as “a melancholic inadequacy” to accept responsibility for the past and for what has become of the nation in the present.

As a testimony of melancholia from the other side of the colonial divide, from the postcolony, Ciocca calls to witness *A Fine Balance* (1996) by Rohinton Mistry, a novel whose glaring and brutal realism would appear to project no chance for mourning or release. The failures or the lost causes of post-independence India are followed through the cruel existential defeats of her victims, oppressed by transgenerational poverty and gender and caste discrimination. Unless the suicide of one of them, the
idealist student Maneck, is taken as the undeniably disabling and yet
denunciatory outcome of a melancholic unconsciousness that is not
prepared to tolerate any further the sense of loss, that is not prepared to get
accustomed to it. From this point of view, melancholy can also become the
existential site of a critical, ethico-political agency, able to criticize what it
initially refused to assimilate and to demolish the conformity and stability
of the status quo.

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