

European and Eastern Theory
Regarding Madness and Separation in U.S. Latino Literature

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Sometimes when I observe some human behavior, I say to my mother in jest that this is crazy behavior and that I'm the only sane one left to make this revelation. At this she remarks that I must be the mad one if I think that everyone else is mad. In his book *Madness and Civilization*, French philosopher and theorist Michel Foucault speaks of madness as a phenomenon in opposition to reason. He states that those who are mad often times have logical arguments when they speak but that the madness stems from a false perception of reality. People who suffer from madness undergo confusion between what is imaginary and what is real, and they lack the ability to distinguish between the two. Even though such a confusion may exist, the arguments of people suffering from madness often make sense. People suffering from madness can distinguish between what is true and what is false, but they do not distinguish between what is real and what is imaginary. Even though my argument seemed logical, it is possible that my mother was right with regards to the "madness" of her daughter. Of course, I beg to differ. This paper examines the interrelation of the themes of madness and separation as relates to literature, particularly Latino literature in the United States through the prism of European and Eastern theory as per Foucault, Kahlil Gibran, and St. Anthony of Egypt.

Some forms of madness are more evident than others. In Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre*, the character of Mrs. Rochester suffers from frenzy as well as having a penchant for hysteria. When Mr. Rochester met his fiancé, she appeared normal. After the wedding, Mr. Rochester became aware of his wife's violent frenzies, which gave rise to the necessity of confining his wife. Mrs. Rochester did not lack intelligence, as at times she tried to escape confinement using astute tactics. Madness is not always as obvious as the case of Mrs. Rochester. Foucault writes "...self-attachment is the first sign of madness, but it is because man is attached to himself that he accepts error as truth, lies as reality, violence and ugliness as beauty and justice" (*Madness* 26).

Stubbornness is a form of self-attachment. Foucault describes a mirror "which without reflecting anything real, will secretly offer the man who observes himself in it the dream of his own presumptions" (*Madness* 27). Foucault calls this type of madness "the madness of vain presumption" by which a person identifies with himself "by means of a delusive attachment that enables him to grant himself all the qualities, all the virtues or powers he lacks. . . . Poor, he is rich; ugly, he admires himself; with chains still on his feet, he takes himself for God" (29). Similarly, when one places himself/herself in a position to judge another, barring courts of law, the individual presumes to take the role of God who does have the right to judge. Someone that suffers from this type of madness also suffers from that to which Foucault refers as blindness or "the essence of classical madness. . . . it refers also to ill-founded beliefs [and] mistaken judgments" (106).

The lack of distinction between illusion and reality is a strict definition of madness. In times past, madness was defined according to the place and time in history in which it occurred.

Seventeenth century European societies, like that of Paris, used to confine vagabonds as well as people who had gone mad to the same place. Each society had its own concept of madness which changed according to the passage of time. In one interval the norm was that people who suffered from madness were transported by boat to other regions. Within the space of fifty years, the norm was to confine these individuals. During this time, madness was associated with idleness, and those who begged for their living were banished to confinement because this type of life, according to Foucault, was outside the parameter of that which was acceptable. An individual who was lazy was perceived as otherworldly and as someone that “crosses the frontiers of bourgeois order of his own accord, and alienates himself outside the sacred limits of its ethic” (Foucault, *Madness* 58).

In a collection of parables called *The Madman*, Lebanese author and poet Kahlil Gibran narrates a story which shows how society establishes the norm of that which is considered as mad. The story is about the king of a city called Wirani. All the inhabitants of the city used to drink water from the same well. One evening a witch came to the town and put poison in the well that whoever should drink of it would become mad. Each of the inhabitants drank of the water of the well save for the king and his chamberlain. All the townspeople became mad and they began to mutter that they should remove the king because he is “mad.” That night the king decided to send his servant to bring water for him and for his lord chamberlain so that they also might drink. When the people of Wirani realized that the king had now “regained his reason,” there was a great celebration among the people. Gibran calls this story “The Wise King.” Is this an accurate description of the king? Is it better to have reason or to lose one’s reason to be a part of the group? It depends on the individual’s priority: a sense of reason or a sense of solidarity. The story of the wise king shares a similarity to that which St. Anthony of Egypt said with prophetic force. St. Anthony said, “The day will come when all the people will be mad and they will say to the sane person, ‘you are mad because you are not like us.’” Though St. Anthony lived his life in the desert in the third century AD, this saying proves strangely relevant for postmodernism. As postmodernism dictates that everything is relative, similarly social restrictions are relative and differ among cultures. This idea is universal for all immigrants as every society establishes its own set of norms, and immigrants are faced with navigating through these new norms. That which is acceptable within one culture’s norm may not be acceptable to another. Those who do not conform to this norm are considered “mad.” In this story we can see that the people did not tolerate anyone different, and the solution to dealing with this difference was to banish the king, in effect, to separation. In the same book, Gibran narrates the story of how a certain man became a “madman” as a result of having his masks stolen. He discovers the freedom that comes from feeling the sun touch his face and the liberation with which he was no longer obligated to conform to societal standards. The madman states: “And I have found both freedom and safety in my madness; the freedom of loneliness and the safety from being understood, for those who understand us enslave something in us” (Gibran 8). Societies in general categorize other cultural groups by placing their members in set boxes and seeing them through their own filter or cultural perspective. They prevent the individual members from being seen contributing to a sense of “otherness” that immigrants often experience. These boxes separate the different ethnic groups. My experience in high school testifies to this otherness; I attended a high school which had a population which was ethnically diverse. In the cafeteria during lunch, people sat in groups

which consisted of people of the same ethnicity with barely any mingling among people with different ethnic heritages. It seemed that sitting with the same ethnic groups was within people's comfort zone and those perceived as different were, in a sense, separated. I will later refer to this as the cafeteria phenomenon.

Each ethnic group or socioeconomic class imposes its own social order with its own norms. In this manner, the "madman" or the individual who is different is ostracized. That which does not follow this set of norms is foreign and unknown and as a result is separated. In *Barefoot Heart*, Elva Treviño Hart narrates about her hometown in Texas in a memoir: "In Pearsall, even the cemeteries were segregated. . . . No gringo in Pearsall would allow his body to rot for eternity among the Mexicans" (444).

The separation of that which is perceived as different is an echo of the manner in which societies handled madness in Europe. Differences in race, socioeconomic class, and the clothes one wears result in separation. In the article "Una Historia de Una de Muchas Marías," María Antonietta Berriozábal narrates her experience of discrimination and racism as a child at the hand of her teachers. This discriminatory treatment came from a perceived sense of superiority of the majority. According to Foucault's ideas, when someone (in this case a member of the minority population) is an outlier of the norm established by the majority, the outcome is a modern day case of "confinement," i.e., discrimination and segregation. The discrimination and lack of tolerance of other races is a way of putting a person in a box and relegating him or her to that box. In the story of *Migrant Souls* by Arturo Islas, there is a sense that "gringos" and Mexicans belong to different worlds, and the two worlds had not established a connection but rather have had a lack of trust on both sides.

Similarities exist between penal systems and the treatment of different ethnicities. The segregation of individuals takes on many forms that, according to Foucault, include the isolation of prisoners from the external world and the isolation of prisoners from each other, and "when he [the prisoner] has profoundly repented and made amends . . . solitude will no longer weigh upon him" (*Discipline* 237). It follows then that incarceration is a form of turning the person away from his crime; it is a social necessity for which the government takes responsibility as part of its function to protect its countrymen. Also it is a form of making persons conform to a norm acceptable to the majority of the population or in some cases the population in power. Foucault indicates that the primary objective of incarceration is to end that which does not relate to the societal hierarchy, i.e., the objective is to end that which does not conform to society's standards and expectations. Foucault writes that "by occupying the convict, one gives him habits of order and obedience; one makes the idler that he was diligent and active" (242). In this manner society uses separation and segregation in order to normalize and make those considered as threats to the social order conform. With that in mind, are those who are inhabitants in residential centers for illegal immigrants considered to be dangerous or perhaps of a different category due to ethnic or socioeconomic differences? The punishments that society imposes are not punishments for crimes or for madness but at root, for ethnic, economic or social class differences. Buré states: "it is not crime that alienates an individual from society, but that crime is itself due rather to the fact that one is in society as an alien" (qtd. in Foucault, *Discipline* 276). On a certain level, punishment in general is against what is different and unknown, and that which does not have a

category in the norms of the social order of the majority. This idea applies to discrimination and plays into the “us vs. them” mindset.

According to Foucault, “The expiation that once rained down upon the body must be replaced by a punishment that acts in depth on the heart” (*Discipline* 16). Nevertheless, attempting to make someone conform by means of incarceration or physical subjugation does not always work as seen in the story “Pecado” by Christine Granados (490). When the narrator was a little girl and was caught talking to boys, her uncle Celestino would make her come to the prayer circle in church. In this way her uncle tried to impose order or the social norm of their community on his niece. But the imposition of conformity did not always work because later in the story, the narrator grows up and ends up living with her boyfriend, a rejection of the conservative pressures of the society in which she was raised and a sign of her individuality. In addition, the narrator discovers that her uncle Celestino had been having an affair while he was married. Thus, though her uncle physically took her church so that she would submit, her heart did not follow. We see a similarity between this scenario and what Foucault writes with regards to punishment, i.e., trying to make a person conform, and the changing effect (or lack thereof) it has on the individual’s heart. Foucault writes, “The great spectacle of the chain gang was linked with the old tradition of public execution, . . . but it was also linked with the confrontations and struggles whose first rumblings it conveyed; it gave them a symbolic outlet: though vanquished by the law, the army of disorder promised to return” (*Discipline* 262). He goes on to say that “The least act of disobedience is punished and the best way of avoiding serious offenses is to punish the most minor offenses very severely” (294). Granados’ story exhibits a sample of a social standard of behavior for girls in a Latino community. It is possible to attempt to change a person, but sometimes the change which occurs is external and only in appearance, not actual “reformation.” Each person holds on to his or her individuality and that which he or she sees as appropriate, regardless of the standard set by the community as a whole. Celestino follows his own individual passions while conforming to standards of acceptable behavior only in appearance, which is another aspect of madness. This passion contributes to Celestino’s specific type of machismo, which is the result of his lustful passions and his sense of male entitlement as he is perfectly content to engage in the affair while receiving the devotion of his simple and kind-hearted (yet oblivious) wife while he carries on his work within his religious community. This sense of male entitlement is a precursor to an intense preoccupation with oneself—a characteristic of madness.

The writings of Foucault demonstrate that madness is characterized by a certain self-centered mindset. He further indicates that when one group does not cohere to another group’s idea of normal, then the outlying group is considered “mad.” St. Anthony expresses this by his prudent yet poignant statement that a majority will consider someone as being mad simply for being different. Kahlil Gibran intimates the same theme through his parables. The way in which societies used to handle madness and criminal activity are not unlike the way modern societies treat individuals who come from different backgrounds or hold different values. Without assimilation or acculturation, different cultural groups segregate and exclude one another. In essence those who are “mad” are just different and the “punishment” thereof is separation as evidenced by the cafeteria phenomenon in my high school, a scene I have since witnessed repeatedly. Apparently I am not the only sane one to make observations about mad or odd

behavior. I remember a friend's wise father once said, "Everybody has a little bit of crazy in them, otherwise they wouldn't be normal." I agree.

Works Cited

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