

The Madwoman Now Being All Women

In the country where she lives, which is no country, the madwoman maps desire's coordinates onto her body. Each hand pressing into her back meets the others that have lingered in that spot; each lover tastes the breath of those gone before, ghosting in her kisses—the madwoman now being all women. The hysteric who cordons off danger so others can believe in safety. The anorectic who starves her flesh so others may eat. The whore whose sex blooms thorns. The mystic whose dust covered feet discredit her visions. The mother whose placid gaze masks the storm gathering fury into its centre.

“Fury,” from *Madwoman*

I've never read *Jane Eyre*.

Wide Sargasso Sea by Jean Rhys—a “prequel” to Charlotte Brontë's novel—made it into my hands first. After reading Rhys's book, about Antoinette Cosway before she became the madwoman in the attic of *Jane Eyre*, I've never been interested in seeing Antoinette recast into, what I can only assume is, a flat, stock madwoman.

Like Antoinette in Rhys's novel, Shara McCallum's madwoman is anything but stock. Shara's fifth collection, *Madwoman*, culls new poems with poems from three of her first four collections to develop the eponymous madwoman who, like Shara, “is mixed-race, from a host of nations, [and] the sum of a bunch of world religions” (“Ten Things You Might Like to Know about Madwoman”).

I met Shara in 2014—she was my boss when I was a Stadler Fellow at Bucknell University's Stadler Center for Poetry. As another woman of color writing about women's bodies and lives, I often found myself with Shara in the belly of the Stadler Center drinking coffee and eating chocolate or at Cherry Alley pouring over the soup du jour discussing women's lives in poetry, about how the confessional was often regarded as a four-letter word. I expressed concern that my work wouldn't be taken seriously, and Shara, with knowing grace, commented that in poetry, like in the “real world,” women's bodies and lives aren't always valued.

Instructions for a *dai* delivering a girl:

For eighty cents more,
take the newborn child,

hold her by the waist,
turn her upside down,

give a sharp jerk
to snap the spinal cord.

Pronounce her
stillborn.

“From the Book of Mothers,” from *This Strange Land*

She told me how she was cautioned against writing about child bearing—advice she, thankfully, left by the wayside. She told me how I'd also have to push aside these “discerning” voices that suggested what is and isn't literature, what experiences are and are not “universal.” I came to understand that these voices were largely white, older, male voices—for whom lives and experiences were often considered “universal.”

We write off that which we do not understand, often cloak it in madness.

From what I understand, we don't know much about the madwoman in *Jane Eyre* except that Rochester has been tricked into marrying her and that she has mental health issues that cost her her life and Rochester his sight. The madwoman, interfering with Brontë's titular character's marriage plot, is an exchangeable plot device, a thing—much in the way that women's bodies, lives, experiences are sometimes rendered.

Shara's work, however, bucks against any suggestion that women's lives and bodies aren't important and challenges the shroud of madness women are dressed in. In fact, the speakers of *Madwoman* are rendered human *through* their madness. If I may borrow language from Ross Gay's newest collection's title, *Madwoman* is an unabashed catalogue of the madwoman and her deep, at times contradictory, complexities, as she exists at the borders of fact and fiction, fascination and phobia, sanity and insanity without apology. The seamless navigation of time and space is my experience of Shara's work—her speakers are familiar because of their complexities as they traverse the linguistic, cultural, and racial borderlands that allow them to be “so everywhere, so nowhere” (“Race”).

For me, one of the most compelling poems from this collection is “Ten Things You Might Like to Know about Madwoman.” I first heard Shara read it in a small library in Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania. The poem is labyrinthine and nonlinear—an enumerated, prose-poem-like list that circles back on itself, as it goes from 5 to 7½ to 6 to 5b—much in the same way our lives are. The madwoman, instead of sharing explicit facts, is unpacking and investigating selfhood: the fact that “she has little actual faith...and...nonetheless has cultivated a deep belief in the colour red,” her “problems distinguishing fact from fiction.” When we finally arrive at 10b, the madwoman self-consciously admits: “If you've been paying attention, you've likely figured out she's confused about many things.”

In both Shara's *Madwoman* and Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, madwomen are allowed to be complicated, as opposed to a shell of a person, stereotyped without the benefit of back-story. In Shara's work, women are invited to be themselves across a variety of landscapes, borders, mythologies, religions, and races. Shara renders the intricate lives we as women lead—as mothers, daughters, sisters, friends, and inhabitants of our bodies—familiar and whole. Even while the madwoman is “confused about many things,” she's complete in her imperfection—not broken, not really all that “mad” at all (“Ten Things You Might Like to Know about Madwoman”). If anything, she's a prophet protecting us from “the storm gathering fury into its centre” (“Fury”). The madwoman is a celebration of our humanity, as she is unapologetically human.

To go a step further, I think that the complexity of this wholeness is rendered not only through content but also through the formal diversity of the collection. The enumerated prose poem quality of “Ten Things You Might Like to Know about Madwoman” appears amidst tight pantoums, ghazals, and sonnets. In her ghazal “Now I'm a Mother,” Shara nimbly marries the diametric

tautness of the form with the complexity of selfhood—the poem’s dénouement reading “Even *Shara* is just a pseudonym now I’m a mother”—describing how motherhood both becomes and obscures the whole self. She does this delicate dance throughout the collection, her poetic movements calculated—“My mother’s screams seamed the world I left / and the one I entered, her spirit extinguished”—her images deft—“a sickle-toothed grin” (“Hour of Duppy and Dream” and “Running”). And what is consistent amidst this formal diversity is a refusal to look away—“entrails splayed in the sun”—from things that are painful—“For example: he killed himself” (“Manchineel” and “Ten Things You Might Like to Know about Madwoman”). Her rich text traverses time, space, realities, languages, and forms, demonstrating that there are no easy answers, definitions, or resolutions.

The trick is to remember

time is a fish
swimming through dark water.

“Exile” from *Madwoman*

For me, as a woman of color, Shara’s work is an important celebration of the intersections at which so many women live; however, I also believe her work has an even more expansive and, dare I say, “universal” impact.

In “Madwoman to Her Deliverer,” Shara writes “My love, / how much longer can you carry on / renaming destruction *rescue* and *peace*?” Lines like this speak volumes in our contemporary moment. There are no easy answers, and we cannot simply shy away from that which we do not understand. That solves nothing. We must lift the shroud to see the complicated back-story of our country, of what has caused us to arrive in this particular political, cultural, social, and economic moment, if we have any hope for forward motion.

In “The Parable of Shit and Flowers,” we are warned that this unveiling will be uncomfortable but also gifted with the knowledge that this discomfort can beget beauty:

I did tell yu that long time but I see now
yu hard-a-hearing. Yu ignorant so till mi nuh know
what to do with yu. Yu don’t even watch news—
stick yu head in sand like ostrich. Child,
life no easy, fi true. Yu choose fi believe
is only bed a rose, but hear mi: I did grow them.
And what yu haffi put in dirt stink to rass,
but is what mek them come up.

Shara doesn’t offer us easy answers, but I do believe, through *Madwoman*, she offers us truth.