

# Encountering the Blank Page: Improvising through Illegible Movements of Mad (Not)Doings

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## Abstract

Through this piece, I struggle through the question of what it might mean to embody a mad methodology. Describing my choreographic encounters with a blank page, I reveal the narratives of failure through which my depressed gestures and anxious movements can be made legible as the *not doing* of academic expectation. And as I engage in a repetition of those gestures of failure, I interpret a performance of *not doing* that forces me to let go of the legibility through which I typically make sense of my movements as a scholar. As this piece increasingly fragments into a space of illegibility and non-sense, I come closer (but never quite get) to accessing the methodologies through which we might embody the fugitivity of mad study.

## The struggle is real: A prelude

I struggled to write this piece.

I struggled to write this piece as I struggle to write any article or creative work. It is always a struggle for me to navigate dominant expectations of academic rigour.

I struggled to write this piece...but this struggle was different.

I struggled to write this piece, and this was a struggle borne from a rigour of care. How do I navigate sharing my mad methodology as it pushes against academic expectations of rigour? How do I understand my movements with and through madness in a way that doesn't police its transgressive possibility—or worse, put it in service of the academy?

I struggled to write this piece because to embody the rigour of my mad methodology is to resist fitting into the legibility of academic discourse. To embody the rigour of my mad methodology, I would need to not write this piece.

I struggled to write this piece. And so, I didn't.

### **An introduction for legibility**

Through past articles and creative works, I have made multiple attempts to pursue the mad registers of my choreographic methods of narrative inquiry.<sup>1</sup> I have engaged my practices of dance improvisation to interpret the narratives through which I make sense of my movements with and through depression, anxiety, and the mad excesses of Filipinx spirituality and queer grief.<sup>2</sup> Through those past explorations, I have played with crafting different critical-creative forms of doing and sharing scholarly work. And still, I feel perturbed by the ways through which those past works have worked to fit madness into academic legibility.

Through this piece, I offer the question of what it might mean to embody a version of mad methodology that pushes back against western epistemologies of Enlightenment Reason and its white supremacist and sanist registers.<sup>3</sup> Encountering this provocation, I recognize that I have failed to fully embody such a mad methodology by the very fact that you are reading this piece. In the prelude, I described the struggle to write. This was a depressed struggle, an anxious struggle—a struggle through madness...

I tried again and again to write.

I opened the blank document again and again.

I panicked again and again.

I requested an extension again and again.

I went back to bed again and again.

I reopened the blank document again and again.

I avoided writing again and again.

I failed to meet the (extended) deadline(s) again and again.

I stayed in bed again and again.

I thought about writing this piece...nonstop.

And still, I wrote it. Or rather, I wrote something. I wrote this piece, and it is very different from the one that I had originally proposed and imagined for this special issue. I also submitted this work past the due date—and when I say past the due date, I don't mean days or weeks. I submitted my first draft of this piece months after the due date, more than half a year late. And still, it reflects my nonstop thinking about what it means to embody madness amidst the academic expectations of methodology through which we can uphold mad studies as an academic (inter)discipline.

Perhaps I should be celebrating the fact that I did it. Perhaps I should be patting myself on the back for advocating for myself and asserting my needs to engage in *crip time* or *madtime* to write this piece.<sup>4</sup> I mourn that, by forcing myself to write this piece, I have not fully embodied my mad movements. I fear that by writing this piece, I am repeating a narrative of overcoming depression and anxiety to reach the success of academic publication. I wonder whether I have disciplined madness in service of its academic inclusion. I am disappointed that I didn't have the courage to fully embrace my mad self. I am disappointed that I didn't have the courage (not) to submit a blank page. I am disappointed in my failure to embody the radical mad methodology I dream of.

I hold onto the blank page—a product of my failure. In doing so, I pursue the queer registers of failure through which Jack Halberstam suggests that “under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world.”<sup>5</sup> I clutch the blank page and feel the creases and wrinkles emanating from my fingers. I crumple the blank

page, my fingers attempting to pursue the dried-up sweaty traces of past anxious syncopations, hoping to experience a moment of surprise through which I might access a different way of being in the world. I drop the blank page and allow for a depressed beat to pass—a moment of rest in which I feel myself enacting a queer performance of failure through my mad gestures of *not doing*.

Through this piece, I describe my choreographic encounters with the blank page to reveal the narratives of failure that make my mad gestures of stillness legible as a *not doing* of the heteropatriarchal academic expectations of thought that Audre Lorde describes as coming from the white fathers who tell us “I think, therefore I am.”<sup>6</sup> At the same time, I share a narrative encounter with my performances of failure to understand how these queer acts of *not doing* embody the mad movements through which my felt interactions with the blank page become a site of choreographic possibility. I hold onto Lorde’s poetic suggestion, her insistence on engaging poetically to listen to the Black mother who whispers, “I feel, therefore I can be free.”<sup>7</sup>

I encounter the blank page as an everyday object, recalling Erin Manning’s choreographic provocation: “That they are everyday objects allows for a certain ease in the encounter with them—they are recognizable, malleable within our habitual movement practices, already available to our imaginations: we know what they can do. And yet, just as the objects have lured us into certain presuppositions, we find that these objects are more than what they appear to be at first glance: in the setting of choreographic encounter, they present themselves as part of an evolving ecosystem. They extend beyond their object-ness to become ecologies for complex environments that propose dynamic constellations of space, time, and movement.”<sup>8</sup> I return to the blank page as a choreographic object that, as Manning further suggests, can “activate an environment for movement experimentation.”<sup>9</sup> And in returning to the blank page, this piece becomes less of an academic pursuit, instead offering

an experimental space through which I engage an interpretive meditation on my movements in relation with the blank page. Refiguring this product of *not doing* into a creative doing, I navigate the expectation for mad methodology to be engaging in creation-as-product. What other unproductive or non-productive creations can be released through my felt encounter with the blank page's ecology of madness?

Rather than writing an academic article to theorize my not writing an academic article, this piece attempts to describe my choreographic encounters with the blank page to reveal the narratives of failure that shape my/our interpretations of my mad gestures of stillness. I share a written act of improvising through the mad gestures that I am made to understand as an embodiment of failure, further reframing them as the movements through which the blank page is created. And in so doing, improvisation becomes a practice of understanding the blank page as something that is created through an act of *not doing*. Improvisation allows me to encounter the blank page as a creative portal into the mad constellations of space, time, and movement through which a method can release itself within this (non)act.

Improvisation further allows me to pursue the ways in which mad methodology is always and already being embodied within the everyday movements of mad being. While such a suggestion is not new and has in many ways been foundational to the development of the field of mad studies,<sup>10</sup> my practices of improvisation are influenced by black radical traditions of study that provide us alternative lineages of understanding the creatively transgressive possibilities of our movements through madness.<sup>11</sup>

I am guided by Fred Moten's suggestion of study as occurring within what he and Stefano Harney describe as the undercommons: "When I think about the way we use the term 'study,' I think we are committed to the idea that study is what you do with other people. It's talking and walking around with other people, working, dancing, suffering, some irreducible convergence of all three, held under the name of speculative practice [...] The point of calling

it ‘study’ is to mark that the incessant and irreversible intellectuality of these activities is already present.”<sup>12</sup> Moten offers us a different understanding of study as being borne out of the intellectuality of what is already present through the everyday fugitive acts of being within the ivory structures of white supremacy, working against the sanist logics of Enlightenment Reason through which we make sense of our movement in relation to an academic mode of being. In the speculative act of dreaming and working towards abolitionist futures, there is a form of intellectuality that gestures to a scholarly doing—what we might begin to understand as method.

Returning to my repeated failure to fit into academic moulds of success, while simultaneously failing to transgress those moulds through this very attempt to write of my failure, I work to honour the intellectuality that is happening through such emotional struggle. I endeavour to pursue the intellectuality present in these acts of mad political struggle that attempt to find belonging within, while simultaneously undermining, the academic modes of being that will always haunt mad studies as an academic discipline. And it is by understanding these acts as the (not)doings of mad intellectuality that we might begin to uncover the possibilities of mad methodology.

La Marr Jurelle Bruce further explicates the relationship between madness and black study, offering us a version of mad methodology that “entails *letting go*: relinquishing the imperative to know, to take, to capture, to master, to lay bare all the world with its countless terrors and wonders.”<sup>13</sup> I return to the blank page to explore the intellectuality present through my gestures of failing to meet the expectations of mastery and capitalist accumulation that structure academic production. And as I engage in a repetition of those gestures of failure, I interpret a performance of *not doing* that forces me to let go of the legibility through which I typically make sense of my movements through binaries of

success/failure. It is in this space of illegibility and non-sense that I come closer to accessing the methodologies through which we might embody the fugitivity of mad study.

*A note on (non)form*

Through this piece, I share a narrative of encountering my choreographic object: the blank page. I write this narrative through mad/crip choreographic practices of fragmentation and leakiness—practices that gesture to the illegibility of my/our improvised movements, transgressing my/our very attempts to fix them into any form.<sup>14</sup> Throughout this piece, I work to fragment my choreographic narrative through abrupt leaps from one idea to the next, leaving gaps between my various thoughts and creating the spaces within which I can trouble the expectations of mastery that arise from western epistemologies of wholeness.<sup>15</sup> I am further influenced by Elisabeth Motley’s suggestion of a crip choreographic method of leakiness where “embodiments are not kept under control and are free to non-normatively and excessively ooze outside of containment.”<sup>16</sup> I invite you to move with the interpretations of my depressed and anxious gestures as they leak into the cavernous gaps between words and phrases. I invite you to join me in the acts of repetition that allow my words and phrases to spill from one page to the next, refusing containment through a commitment to uncertainty.

What ultimately gives some semblance of form and coherence to this piece is my/our return to the blank page. This is, following Tanya Titchkosky, a “restless reflexive return” that seeks to understand my past movements by revealing the stories of failure through which I might interpret my future mad gestures of (not)doing scholarship.<sup>17</sup> While the blank page is a product of my *not doing* the writing of this piece, it holds the stories through which I make meaning of my past gestures. And through my improvised attempts to tell some of these stories, this work further choreographs a speculative dance that navigates what it might mean to move with and through madness differently.

### *A note on citation*

Katherine McKittrick offers the following questions that shape this piece's orientation to citational practice: "What if citations offer advice? What if citations are suggestions for living differently?"<sup>18</sup> Rather than understanding citation as a way of disciplining my theoretical movements, I orient to citation as the improvisational provocations that inspire a different way of understanding my movements with the blank page. Instead of marking my belonging within the canonization of mad studies, citation becomes an act of assembling the various radical traditions of struggle that might challenge our sense of what it means to engage in mad study.

### **Encountering the choreographic object: A blank page**

This is the (non-)product of my depressive gestures and of my anxious movements. This is the object through which I can make sense of my *not doing* through narratives of failure. This is the space through which I search for an embodiment of mad methodology.

*A blank page,*  
this is what I dream of creating through a rigorous pursuit of  
my mad method.

*nothing,*  
If I were to submit a blank page as my contribution for this special issue, it would be  
easy to identify it as

*nothing...*  
...there is nothing written on the page.  
...Miggy has not done what Miggy said Miggy would do.  
...Miggy has failed to do what was outlined in Miggy's proposal.

*a (not)doing.*  
This blank page would be identified as a *not doing*.

*A not doing.*  
It is through this negation of doing that we might pursue a creative act.

*A doing.*  
What is being done through this *not doing*?



*A (not)doing.*

How can we orient toward a transgressive *not doing* that resists the expectations of what one does as a scholar?

*A scholarly (not)doing.*

A scholarly doing must *do* something that can be legible as a scholarly doing. The blankness of the page cannot be legible as the sharing of research. Such a submission would contribute nothing to our understanding of mad methodology nor to the (inter)discipline of mad studies. My *not doing* of writing can only be made legible as my failure to contribute anything to academic discourse. And it is this gesture of failure that I offer to all of us who are committed to a scholarly pursuit of mad methodologies.

*a blank page.*

I offer you the submission of a blank page because it is the only product I can provide that embodies how I am coming to understand my mad methods.

*a blank page.*

The object that gets me closest to understanding my body and its mad gestures.

*a blank page.*

The object through which I access my body's stillness—its movements through madness.

*A scholarly (not)doing.*

I offer you this submission of a scholarly (not)doing, pursued through my practice of dance improvisation.

*A scholarly (not)doing.*

I offer you this submission of a scholarly (not)doing performed through my repeated attempts to make sense of my acts of failure through my gestures of stillness.

*nothing,*

I offer my gestures of stillness, a repetition of not moving, a legible nothingness that reveals the fugitivity of illegible mad be(com)ings.

*a failure,*

I begin by acknowledging my failure to embody my mad methodology. I am attempting to make legible an understanding of my blank page and the gestures of stillness through which its blankness can be produced. I am being moved by the academic impulse to map an appearance of my gestures of stillness onto a blank page. I am being coerced by the academic expectation to map my movements through depression and anxiety.

*a failed embodiment,*

I don't write. I return to bed.

*a failed embodiment,*  
I don't write. I procrastinate.

*a failed embodiment,*  
I don't write. I clean, cook, rearrange my bookshelf, make a schedule, start a to-do list...that includes writing.

*a failed embodiment,*  
I don't write. I practice self-care, take my dog for a walk, hang out with friends.

*a failed embodiment,*  
I go to therapy.

*a failed embodiment,*  
I stay out too late and have one-too-many glasses of wine.

*a failed embodiment,*  
I binge watch three seasons of *Gilmore Girls*.

*a failed embodiment,*  
I don't go to therapy.

*a failed embodiment,*  
Rather than writing this piece, I write abstracts—proposals for three other calls for papers.

*a failure of embodiment.*

Queer theorist Jack Halberstam suggests, "Under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world."<sup>19</sup>

*A failed embodiment,*  
My pulse races.

*a failed embodiment,*  
I breath in through my nose...1, 2, 3, 4.

*a failed embodiment,*  
My fingers curl, digging into my palms.

*a failed embodiment,*  
I hold my breath...1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7.

*a failed embodiment,*  
My shoulders rise as my body hunches forward.

*a failed embodiment,*  
I breath out through my mouth...1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8.

*a failure of embodiment.*

I don't write.

*A creative struggle,*

And still, I return to failure as a creative encounter—a radically compassionate space of understanding how we might move differently.

*a failure,*

I return to failure as a space—as an interpretive encounter.

*and still—*

The Oxford English Dictionary defines stillness as the “absence of movement or physical disturbance; motionless.”<sup>20</sup>

*and still—*

I don't need a dictionary to tell me that my depressed gestures of stillness can be perceived as a lack of movement.

*and still—*

My being through stillness is always speaking back to the haunting spectre of definitional ways of knowing—the fixing of my non-movement into a language that can be mobilized against me.

*a failure,*

I return to failure as a space—as an encounter with all the meanings made of my still body.

*—in stillness,*

I am marked as unproductive through the fixing of letters on my transcript.

*—in stillness,*

I am pathologized through the identification of symptoms made sensible as diagnosis within the DSM.

*—in stillness,*

I am pitied through the words of colleagues as they pat me on the back and proceed to meetings or networking events without me.

*—in stillness,*

I am devalued, disregarded...discarded.

*—in stillness,*

I fail to move in an expected way to the university.

*—in stillness,*

*a failure,*

I return to failure as a site—as a stage on which I perform the meanings made of my still body.

*—in stillness,*

I explore the richness of my movements through madness.

*a failure,*

I return to failure as a stage—the site on which I improvise through the meanings made of my still body.

*—in stillness,*

I interpret other stories of my movements through madness and embody their possibilities of a different method of being within the university.

*an embodiment of fugitivity,*

Through black study, Fred Moten describes that “fugitivity, then, is a desire for and a spirit of escape and transgression of the proper and the proposed. It’s a desire for the outside, for a playing or being outside, an outlaw edge proper to the now always already improper voice or instrument.”<sup>21</sup>

*a (not)doing.*

I want to honour my gestures of stillness as the *not doings* that resist racial capitalist expectations of productive doing.<sup>22</sup> I want to embody stillness as my resistance to the desire for membership in the institutional life of the academy—a life that ultimately requires mad death through what Elaine Cagulada and I have previously described as the “corpsing promises” of the ivory tower.<sup>23</sup>

*A scholarly (not)doing.*

I want to have the courage to assert a blank page as the work in and of itself.

*A scholarly (not)doing,*

I want to have the courage to assert a blank page as the work of madness which is always and already playing outside of the university and the hauntings of Enlightenment Reason.

*nothing.*

And I recognize that within the capitalist structuring of academia, to do so might be too radical—even for me.

*nothing.*

I want this piece to be published. I write. I want that CV line. I conform to citational conventions and write an abstract. I want the academic capital of a publication.

*A doing.*

I want this piece to be published. I want to offer us a different way of perceiving our mad (not)doings of method.

*A failed embodiment,*

Even considering the idea of submitting the nothingness of a blank page causes my jaw to unhinge itself, an early warning tic of the anxiety that will spiral into a depressive *not doing*...

*a blank page.*

...maybe I *do* need to submit a blank page...

*A (not)doing,*

My stillness gestures to J. Logan Smilges' invitation to engage in crip practices of "access thievery."<sup>24</sup>

*a scholarly (not)doing,*

My blank page becomes a gesture of stealing access into academic publication that, as Smilges asserts, is also "redefining what access means in the process."<sup>25</sup>

*a scholarly (not)doing,*

Smilges further suggests, "We're not settling for survival. We're stealing for our flourishing. We're stealing because we're owed the opportunity to thrive; we're allowed to demand more for ourselves than just barely enough."<sup>26</sup>

*a blank page.*

I'm still just trying to survive...

*a scholarly (not)doing,*

I want this piece to be published. I want that CV line. I want the academic capital of a publication.

*A page,*

...I offer myself a compassionate gesture of care as I fill this page. I confront the precarity of my need not to do the mad methods that I dream of through my mad embodiments of *not doing*.

*a scholarly (not)doing,*

I want this piece to be published. I want to offer us a different way of perceiving our mad (not)doings of method.

*a blank page.*

I'm still just trying to survive...

*a fugitive gesture.*

How can I engage this not doing of madness in a way that still honours the mad doings of *not doing*? Perhaps this is the limits of understanding mad methodology within an academic context.

*A (not)doing,*

Through his engagement with the mad registers of black radical creativity, Bruce offers us a version of mad methodology that “primes us to extend *radical compassion* to the madpersons, queer personae, ghosts, freaks, weirdos, imaginary friends, disembodied voices, unvoiced bodies, and unreasonable others, who trespass, like stowaways or fugitives, in Reasonable modernity.”<sup>27</sup>

*a scholarly (not)doing,*

I try to practice radical compassion as I fit myself into this academic act of making a mad self make sense.

*a (not)doing.*

I return to the gesture through which the blankness of the page is made possible—I return to my gesture of stillness. There are so many movements within a gesture that is so easily considered the negation of movement.

*A refusal of movement.*

Halberstam suggests, “The movement of things can be felt and touched and exists in language and in fantasy, it is flight, it is motion, it is fugitivity itself. Fugitivity is not only escape [...] fugitivity is being separate from settling.”<sup>28</sup>

*A refusal of movement.*

Stillness is still a movement—a gesture that refuses to settle into the legibility of the academic movements expected of us. Following Halberstam, a fugitive pursuit of stillness allows us to access such a gesture’s movements through language and fantasy.

*And still—*

The Oxford English Dictionary defines stillness as the “absence of movement or physical disturbance.”<sup>29</sup>

*—in stillness,*

I pursue a language of struggle.

*—in stillness,*

I manifest a fantasy of struggle.

*—in stillness,*

struggle becomes the fugitive movement of asserting a being separate from settlement.

*—in stillness,*

fugitivity invites me to embody a gesture of escape that is also a refusal to become settled within the settler colonial logics of academic belonging.

*a gesture of refusal.*

Tina Campt offers a generous lesson through her own theoretical experiences of black study: “I theorize the practice of refusal as an extension of the range of creative responses black communities have marshaled in the face of racialized dispossession. In this context, refusal is not a response to a state of exception or extreme violence. I theorize it instead as practices honed in response to sustained, everyday encounters with exigency and duress that rupture a predictable trajectory of flight.”<sup>30</sup>

*A gesture of refusal,*

I refuse to write—an act of rest that becomes an everyday practice.

*a fugitive gesture,*

I lie in bed, restless—an everyday practice of duress...I cannot rest.

*an embodiment of fugitivity,*

I engage the creativity of madness as a fugitive project—the rupture that is committed to stealing intellectuality from the white supremacist university in order to imagine a different world.<sup>31</sup> For me, to move with and through madness is to engage in a creative abolitionist project that cannot rest until we create a form of sociality where carceral logics no longer structure the world order, where acts of policing no longer govern our relations to each other, to ourselves, to place, to land, to all beings, to knowledge...to meaning.

*an abolitionist gesture,*

Abolitionist scholar Ruth Wilson Gilmore suggests that “abolition is a fleshly and material presence of social life lived differently.”<sup>32</sup>

*an embodiment of fugitivity,*

This is a movement that navigates unrest through the assertion of rest as a radical act of destruction. I wonder whether rest can become a gesture of care. I wonder if care can trouble and disrupt capitalist expectations of our “human” being. I wonder if care through rest, rest-as-care, can reveal different ways of relating to our bodies and our minds by recognizing the creative force of *not doing*.

*a fugitive gesture,*

Therí Alyce Pickens offers us a way to question the category of human through her engagement with the entanglements of madness and Blackness: “Conceptually humanity separates the human from flora and fauna and ostensibly guarantees that a human will be thought of as an autonomous subject, operating with agency and securing the legal, social, cultural, political, and material conditions to do so. For mad Black subjects, this definition of the human does not apply.”<sup>33</sup>

*an embodiment of fugitivity,*

A performance of our mad (not)doings distances us from the category of human that grounds the white supremacist project of Enlightenment Reason. To embody the (not)doings of madness, we must trouble these narratives of human that shape how we come to know of ourselves.

*a blank page.*

I return to a story I have told before.

*A fugitive gesture,*

I wonder if care through rest, rest-as-care, can become a gesture of accessing the always and already other ways of relating to our bodies and our minds through mad movements of *not doing*.

*a fugitive gesture,*

And still, I can't rest. I don't even know how to rest...

*a fugitive gesture,*

I find recognition in a sloth's slow movements. Trying to understand the muscular effort of slowness, I am unable to articulate its lessons for more-than-human being.

*a fugitive gesture,*

For the holidays, a friend gifts me socks patterned with sloths bathing in hot chocolate. It feels like a warm hug.

*an abolitionist movement,*

Activist and scholar Liat Ben-Moshe suggests that abolition, "is about letting go of attachments to forms of knowledge that rely on certainty (the definitive consequences of doing or *not doing*)."<sup>34</sup>

*a fugitive gesture,*

I take a dance class, and we are invited to explore the slow and sustained movements of a sloth. I improvise movements through stillness—a physically demanding task of muscular contraction.

*nothing.*

I offer my gestures of stillness, a repetition of not moving, a legible nothingness revealing the fugitivity of illegible being. I invite such gestures to trouble my ways of knowing and the forms they may take. I wonder how my (not)doings slide past the certainty of definitive language.

*nothing.*

Mimi Khúc, scholar of things unwell, shares her experience: "I rest. A lot. I laze about as much as possible, and that perhaps is one of my greatest successes. I am lazy as fuck, and I luxuriate in it. I call this Sloth Professoring."<sup>35</sup>

*nothing.*

Is there privilege in being a sloth? Is there a certain level of privilege required to get away with being intentionally lazy? There is definitely privilege in being a professor.

*A fugitive gesture,*

I rest not because I choose to. I rest because I need to. I choose to pursue my body's struggle against the academic impulse not to rest.

*nothing.*

I return to the risk Khúc is calling on us to take. I navigate the risk of being a sloth within the capitalist expectations of never-ending production. I recognize the fugitivity of luxuriating in my depressive gestures of stillness that would easily mark me as unproductive—as a threat to the productivity of the university.



*nothing.*

My performances of laziness may lead to me losing teaching jobs. My gestures of rest may result in my not finishing my dissertation, further preventing me from accessing academic jobs. My sloth movements might be understood as pathologically unproductive, leading to my being labelled as mad.

*a fugitive gesture,*

To do madness is not merely an intentional choice. The label of madness is not something we simply choose—we become mad through the ways in which our gestures are made knowable as pathological, as deviant, and as threatening. We are made mad.

*a fugitive gesture,*

We create madness.

*an abolitionist movement.*

How can we create something else?

*A creative nothing,*

What is the relationship between creativity and madness?

*an improvised creation,*

This piece is an improvisation, and following artist and dance scholar Thomas F. DeFrantz, “that doesn’t mean we don’t rehearse, or that things happen randomly according to some sort of free-floating happenstance. no, this is an improvisation in the manner of Black aesthetics: honed by experience, contained by the afterlives of slavery, wondering at its resistances even as it moves toward grace. and laboring toward an elegance of citation.”<sup>36</sup>

*a creative struggle,*

I attempt to pursue the registers of madness that move me through the improvised interpretations of my stillness. I attempt to release a creative doing that doesn’t consume madness into the legibility of excellence.<sup>37</sup> I desire to disrupt the language of excellence, and its white supremacist demands of mastery. I attempt to shatter any sense of legibility through which we can police madness into the language of productivity. I return to the illegibility of mad movements in the hope of pursuing the errant pathways of alterity, the elegant citations of everyday struggle, the mundane revolutionary gestures that are too easily foreclosed through the language of genius and excellence.

*an improvised struggle,*

Toni Morrison suggests, “Sexist language, racist language, theistic language – all are typical of the policing languages of mastery, and cannot, do not permit new knowledge or encourage the mutual exchange of idea.”<sup>38</sup>

*and still—*

The Oxford English Dictionary defines stillness as the “absence of movement or physical disturbance; motionless.”<sup>39</sup>

*a creative nothing,*

What is the relationship between creativity and madness? What ways of knowing are released through the ephemerality of mad movements, movements of flight that cannot be fixed through a mastery of written word?

*a gesture of refusal,*  
I push against the knot in my neck.

*a blank page.*  
This is what I dream of creating through a rigorous pursuit of  
my stillness and its felt promises of a mad method.

*A gesture of refusal,*  
I dig my thumb into the muscle fibres tensed from anxiety, the material manifestation of my  
repeated gestures of *not doing*.

*a blank page.*  
I wish I had the courage to submit this.

*A gesture of refusal,*  
I push back against the inspirational mad figure who can overcome mental anguish to create  
an artistic masterpiece. I refuse to claim a status of genius for madness, resisting the attempt  
to reify what Margaret Price describes as the “commonsense link between madness and  
genius.”<sup>40</sup>

*a blank page.*  
...maybe I *do* need to submit a blank page...

*A gesture of refusal,*  
I massage the knot, while holding onto its echoes of struggle.

*a page,*  
...I offer myself a compassionate gesture of care as I fill this  
page.

*a fugitive gesture,*  
Bruce suggests that by “activating a mad methodology, we might seriously engage, rather  
than glibly dismiss, accounts that appear to be delusional, unReasonable, far-fetched,  
fantastical, mythical, mystical, apocryphal, improbable, or impossible.”<sup>41</sup>

*a blank page.*  
I wish I had the courage to submit this...

*A (not)doing*  
of Reason.

*A (not)doing*  
of lucidity.

*A (not)doing*  
of fact or non-fiction, of real or true, of the probable or possible.

*A (not)doing,*  
What might it mean to seriously engage this illegibility as my magnum  
opus?

*A (not)doing,*  
of reason.

*a blank page.*  
I return to a story I have told before.

*a blank page.*  
It is a story of a student who submitted a blank page for their final assignment after I had told them to submit anything so that I can give them a passing mark... it is a story of my giving them an incomplete mark.

*A scholarly (not)doing,*  
I imagine a future when this impossibility is possible.

*a blank page.*  
I dream of a future when this would be enough.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Jose Miguel Esteban, "The Inspiration of Our Remembering: My Dance with Katherine Duham, Our Dance with the Itch of Disability," *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 16, no. 1 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.3828/jlcds.2022.6>; Jose Miguel Esteban, "My Panalanging of (Un)Belonging: Encountering Still Gestures of Prayer, Improvising Still Movements through Depression," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 43, no. 1 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v43i1.9655>.

<sup>2</sup> Jose Miguel Esteban, "Embodying Maarte: Reinterpreting Queer Performances of Failure through Crip Inspirations," *Feral Feminisms* 14, no. 1 (2024), <https://feralfeminisms.com/embodying-maarte-reinterpreting-queer-performances-of-failure-through-crip-inspirations/>.

<sup>3</sup> Throughout this piece, I capitalize *Reason* when referring to what La Marr Jurelle Bruce describes as the "proper noun denoting a positivist, secularist, Enlightenment-rooted episteme purported to uphold objective 'truth' while mapping and mastering the world." Following Bruce, I distinguish this epistemological project that upholds white supremacist and sanist expectations of proper thought and being, from other (and possibly more mad) practices of pursuing moments and gestures of understanding. La Marr Jurelle Bruce, *How to Go Mad Without Losing Your Mind: Madness and Radical Black Creativity*. (Duke University Press, 2021), 4.

<sup>4</sup> Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*. (Indiana University Press, 2013), 27; Ellen Samuels, "Six Ways of Looking at Crip Time," *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 37, no. 3 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v37i3.5824>; Bruce, *How to Go Mad*, 204.

<sup>5</sup> [Jack] Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*. (Duke University Press, 2011), 2-3. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11sn283>.

<sup>6</sup> Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. (Crossing Press, 1984), 37.

<sup>7</sup> Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 37.

<sup>8</sup> Erin Manning, *Always More Than One: Individuation's Dance*. (Duke University Press, 2013), 92. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11smsgz>.

<sup>9</sup> Manning, *Always More than One*, 93

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<sup>10</sup> Robert Menzies, Brenda A. LeFrançois, and Geoffrey Reaume “Introducing Mad Studies,” in *Mad Matters: A Critical Reader in Canadian Mad Studies*, eds. Brenda A. LeFrançois, Robert Menzies, and Geoffrey Reaume (Canadian Scholars Press, 2013), 14.

<sup>11</sup> Throughout this piece, when I refer to black radical and creative traditions of study, I use lowercase *black* to, following Bruce, “emphasize an *improper* blackness [...] a blackness that is neither capitalized nor propertized via the protocols of Western grammar.” When quoting, paraphrasing and/or referring to people’s identities, I follow the lead of the scholars I am referencing to honour each choice to capitalize or not capitalize b/Black. Bruce, *How to Go Mad*, 6.

<sup>12</sup> Stefanon Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*. (Minor Compositions, 2013), 110.

<sup>13</sup> Bruce, *How to Go Mad*, 11.

<sup>14</sup> Jose Miguel Esteban and Elisabeth Motley, “Fragmenting Cripistemology: Gap Movement and Choreographic Practice,” *Choreographic Practices* 15, no. 1 (2024): 114, [https://doi.org/10.1386/chor\\_00069\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/chor_00069_1); Elisabeth Motley, “Crip Aesthetics and a Choreographic Method of Leakiness,” *Dance Chronicle* 47, no. 1 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1080/01472526.2023.2279514>.

<sup>15</sup> Esteban and Motley, “Fragmenting Cripistemology”: 122.

<sup>16</sup> Motley, “Choreographic Method of Leakiness,” 6.

<sup>17</sup> Tanya Titchkosky, *The Question of Access: Disability, Space, Meaning*. (University of Toronto Press, 2011), 15.

<sup>18</sup> Katherine McKittrick, *Dear Science and Other Stories*. (Duke University Press, 2021), 19. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478012573>.

<sup>19</sup> Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*, 2-3.

<sup>20</sup> Oxford University Press. “Stillness.” *Oxford English Dictionary*. Accessed February 7, 2025. [https://www.oed.com/dictionary/stillness\\_n?tl=true](https://www.oed.com/dictionary/stillness_n?tl=true).

<sup>21</sup> Fred Moten, *The Stolen Life*. (Duke University Press, 2018), 131. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822372028>.

<sup>22</sup> Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. (Zed Press, 1983).

<sup>23</sup> Elaine Cagulada and Jose Miguel Esteban, “In, Against, and Beyond the Ivory: Dreams of Belonging Otherwise through Wonder and Embodied Poetry,” *TOPIA: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies* 47 (2023): 140, <https://doi.org/10.3138/topia-2023-0010>.

<sup>24</sup> J. Logan Smilges, *Crip Negativity*. (University of Minnesota Press, 2023), 41. <https://doi.org/10.5749/9781452969602>.

<sup>25</sup> Smilges, *Crip Negativity*, 41.

<sup>26</sup> Smilges, *Crip Negativity*, 41.

<sup>27</sup> Bruce, *How to Go Mad*, 10.

<sup>28</sup> Jack Halberstam, foreword to *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*, by Stefano Harney and Fred Moten. (Minor Compositions, 2013), 11.

<sup>29</sup> Oxford University Press. “Stillness.”

<sup>30</sup> Tina Campt, *Listening to Images*. (Duke University Press, 2017), 10. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1134dm3>.

<sup>31</sup> Stefanon Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons*, 110.

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<sup>32</sup> Ruth Wilson Gilmore, “Prisons and Class Warfare,” interview by Clément Petitjean, *Verso*, July 25, 2018, <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3954-prisons-and-class-warfare-an-interview-with-ruth-wilson-gilmore>.

<sup>33</sup> Therí Alyce Pickens, *Black Madness :: Mad Blackness*. (Duke University Press, 2019), 74. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478005506>.

<sup>34</sup> Liat Ben-Moshe, *Decarcerating Disability: Deinstitutionalization and Prison Abolition*. (University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 126. <https://doi.org/10.5749/j.ctv10vm2vw>.

<sup>35</sup> Mimi Khúc, *Dear Elia: Letters from the Asian American Abyss*. (Duke University Press, 2024), 106. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478027799>.

<sup>36</sup> Thomas F. DeFrantz, “Soundz at the Back of My Head,” *Theatre* 50, no. 3 (2020): 74, <https://doi.org/10.1215/01610775-8651221>.

<sup>37</sup> rosalind hampton, “Black Studies Without Excellence,” *TOPIA: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies* 47 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.3138/topia-2023-0039>.

<sup>38</sup> Toni Morrison, “Toni Morrison Nobel Lecture,” *The Nobel Prize*, December 7, 1993, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1993/morrison/lecture/>.

<sup>39</sup> Oxford University Press. “Stillness.” *Oxford English Dictionary*. Accessed February 7, 2025. [https://www.oed.com/dictionary/stillness\\_n?tl=true](https://www.oed.com/dictionary/stillness_n?tl=true).

<sup>40</sup> Margaret Price, *Mad at School: Rhetorics of Mental Disability and Academic Life*. (University of Michigan Press, 2011), 2. <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.1612837>.

<sup>41</sup> Bruce, *How to Go Mad*, 43.