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For the Insane in the Insane World

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Abstract

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, we are all now living in a world of mass panic, confusion, and isolation that inflicts experiences of mental illness on those not typically considered mentally ill. When, where, and how does identifying "mental illness" come to trap certain people under the stigmatizing identity, while others are able to avoid the problematic medical classification but not the lived experience? As a writer mitigating a long-term struggle between my lived experiences with depression and anxiety, and the outside categorization and medical classification of these "mental illnesses", I realize the current public sentiment has never been more welcoming of my personal musings on these tensions. I have centered an autoethnographic approach that reflects on mental health experiences and critiques of biomedical ontologies through a reading of *My Brilliant Friend* (and the associated quadrilogy). By attending to socially relevant story arcs involving mental health, I use the symbol of book character Lila's "blurred boundaries" to both identify and rethink mental health categorizations and lived experiences that previously differentiated subsets of people prior to COVID-19. My reflection ultimately seeks to address the ways that these once dissimilar groups have converged psychologically through disruptions of time during the current health pandemic.

Keywords

COVID-19, mental illness, time, production, failure

Social media posts in our now COVID-centric world are peppered with nifty mental health coping strategies, gracing the screens of those who have never had to question their mental health before. Ranging from journalistic pieces to viral memes, the mainstream media is contributing to a heightened awareness of something previously relegated to the outskirts of socially appropriate content: the struggles of mental illness. It is almost as though identifying with or admitting to "mental health" problems is becoming stylish, or at least, comfortably relatable. In this scared new world, more people are forced to confront their mortality and reckon with a "self" divorced from external forms of validation, something most of us are not taught to do. Within this context, it makes sense that anxiety and depression are playing a more prominent role in the lives of the public. Now that the mainstream media is casually peddling therapeutic messages for people as if insanity is itself now mainstream, I cannot help but interrogate the experience of mental suffering. When, where, and how does identifying "mental illness" come to trap some people under the stigmatizing identity, while others are able to avoid the problematic medical classification but not the psychological experience?

Before I proceed, I'd like to establish my reasoning for my pronoun choices. I am writing from a position of relative privilege as a white cis woman from a middle-class background. I therefore understand the problematic use of first- and second-person plural when I represent a viewpoint from this position. However, not using "we" or "us" feels much too detached considering the intimacy and vulnerability of the piece. Rather than assuming that I am indeed referring to everyone when I use "we" or "us," I want this choice to act as a sort of invitation for the reader to feel solidarity in reflecting on my realizations or experiences – but only if it is appropriate, and when they choose to do so. I also prefer to mix up my pronoun choices so that there is not the dominance of one type of connection between author and reader over another, and to produce a less cohesive, more messy, and fluid sense of connection. With this in mind, I turn to the literary quadrilogy of *My Brilliant Friend*.

As someone who is suddenly finding her "mental illness" dissolving into the rhetoric of popular media, my thoughts wander to Raffaella (Lila) Cerullo, the second in command of Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan novels, and a literary character with whom I feel an intense solidarity. Through *My Brilliant Friend* (Ferrante, 2012), and the associated quadrilogy, Ferrante shows the life of someone who, through any other mainstream platform, would be defined by mental illness. Rather, Ferrante depicts the strong-willed, resilient supporting heroine in a saga of girlhood friendship who experiences the occasional lapse in reality. These lapses are stated, not in terms of pathology, but rather, within the poetic description of "dissolving boundaries".

Ferrante paints a vivid picture of these "dissolving boundaries", in which Lila's actual visual boundaries dissolve. From this visual perspective, objects become mangled within each other, leaving a convoluted mess of melted objects: "She said that the outlines of things and people were delicate, that they broke like cotton thread... an object lost its edges and poured into another, into a solution of heterogeneous materials, a merging and mixing" (Ferrante, 2015, p. 175). Though the novels only describe these moments as having a negative impact on Lila, I believe that this power to dissolve boundaries should not be considered a weakness, as the invisible side of this ability gives her the determination to triumph over boundaries of a more abstract nature (e.g., socially ingrained hierarchies and norms).

To have the fortitude to dissolve boundaries, it is vital to understand where boundaries will be needed and to ration strength according to which boundaries you should dissolve – and are, in fact, within your power to dissolve. When life becomes solely focused on being triumphant over everything around you, you cannot focus or act clearly because you cannot fight and overcome everything. Without realizing it, you become incapable of recognizing the problems that should take priority because they become camouflaged within the landscape of everything antagonizing you. Lila tries to explain this experience to her childhood companion, Lenu, by warning her:

> "If she [Lila] became distracted, real things, which, with their violent, painful contortions, terrified her, would gain the upper hand over the unreal ones... she would be plunged into a sticky, jumbled reality and would never again be able to give sensations clear outlines" (Ferrante, 2015, p. 176).

Viewing everything as a threat, as a "sticky jumbled reality" ultimately diminishes both mental and physical strength through the exertion of pressure on certain limits that cannot be overcome.

When Lila faces these extreme moments of blurred reality, she always seeks refuge in Lenu, who calms her by providing a grounding sense of stability, akin to a mother nurturing an ill child. Why does Lila choose Lenu to trust in these moments of great fragility and mental chaos, even when the two characters grow apart and have not spoken in years? Along with the type of intimate trust only achieved from childhood bonds of friendship, I believe this is because Lenu can break up the fear of the uncontrollable into digestible doses. Maybe she has no choice. Lenu has to succumb to the pain as it comes, because she understands that she is limited and cannot control everything simply because she wants to. Lenu admits at a certain point in her life, "I was getting used to being happy and unhappy at the same time, as if that were the new, inevitable law of my life" (Ferrante, 2015, p. 76). Here lies an example in which she understands that certain unfortunate paradoxes are inevitable. So, is it Lila's strength that forces her to the breaking point, the blurring of boundaries? Are those who struggle to maintain their grip on reality, and resist the longest, the strongest? Is strength only based on the length of an unbroken line? Or are the small, broken lines added together stronger because they are greater than the length of the long, unending line?

In the medicalized culture of the Western present, mental illness is rarely, if ever, equated with strength because it is characterized as an illness, something taking strength away from the body and mind. Perhaps the sociomedical framework of "mental illness" implies so much weakness because these classifications regularly place weakness as the origin rather than the aftereffect of incredible perseverance. Why are we, the people who others think are Crazy, considered the weak ones, when it feels like we actually fight so much harder and longer than everyone else? Perhaps this is because we put all our resources and strength, like Lila, into one long battle, so that by the end of it, we have exhausted every single part of ourselves. At times, we do not even have the energy to recognize the lines and boundaries of reality. We are stuck in this rotating system of courageous feats and debilitating failures, only to be defined and identified by the failures.

In response to my earlier speculation of whether strength can be surmised from one unbroken line or many unbroken lines, it perhaps seems logical to see Lila as weaker because quantity seems to hold more value than length in our capitalist world obsessed with production. But personal strength cannot be determined by math. Even psychology, which sometimes claims to do so, does not hold the scientific capacity to determine the personal strength and weakness of an individual. Weakness cannot be weakness exclusively because it exists in a dichotomy with strength. For example, Lila's fear of the uncontrollable translates into her bold passion for pushing hard against forces holding her back, or vice versa; her intense desire to triumph over boundaries leads her to fear her inability to do so. Lila's power derives from the strength of pushing boundaries, while Lenu's power lies in enabling structures of limitation. Although they derive their strength from seemingly opposing sources, they both have indeterminable powers that lead to impressive personal victories. If we were to put these dynamics of strength and weakness into the context of our current world order, I believe that Lila represents the people in the pre – COVID-19 world defined as crazy, weak, and mentally unstable, while Lenu represents the people in our post COVID-19 world who are feeling craziness, weakness, and mental instability for the first time, but who are not defined by these experiences, or at least, not yet.

Though the difficulties in transitioning to the reality of a global health pandemic are numerous for those from both orientations, it seems as though the mixing up of temporal frameworks has an especially problematic impact on the "Lenus" of the world: those that derive strength from established boundaries.This is not to say that people diagnosed

with mental illness are immune to disturbances in the dominant temporal matrix. Rather, dealing with emotional suffering disturbs time in and of itself, so we are used to being throttled by inconsistencies in our greater reality. The normalized capitalist structure of time is one of those boundaries that can be important to utilize and may have served many of us well in a hyper-capitalist and production obsessed neoliberal state. With the many demands placed on us for acceptance as normative socio-political subjects, the capitalist structure of time provides an organized framework through which we can discipline our bodies and minds to achieve both capitalist and personal goals. While this structure has the very real capacity to wreck our bodies and minds in the process, some, even those diagnosed with neurodivergent minds, benefit from having a tool through which to organize the tasks demanded of us from various socio-political pressures. Lenu, whether she is conscious of this or not, utilizes these strategies of practicality, while still maintaining strength and perseverance where and when she can.

The more nefarious side of structuring time according to capitalist demands, however, can lead to feelings of unworthiness founded on futuristic notions of productivity. Useless or not, the actions we carried out in our pre – COVID-19 lives, and continue to carry out today, are programmed with socially determined meanings of productivity and time. According to this model, there is always a beginning, middle, and end. If the middle does not give way to an end that produces, we are told to start over, give up, or continue until success is reached. Lenu struggles with these feelings of inadequacy when the labours of motherhood halt her writing career, during which time she cannot write or produce. These strict temporal guidelines do not afford us fluidity, as there is no regard paid to the well-being of the self when production trumps everything. Because self-worth and identity are founded upon what we do and what we can achieve under this framework, it's as if we stop existing once we stop producing.

With the onset of a pandemic that forces our worlds into stillness, many of us panic in our idleness. We do not know who we are without our achievements to make us feel valuable. As someone who has struggled with these thoughts since childhood, I related and continue to relate to the pure frustration of feeling inadequate from a lack of production long before the world of COVID-19 forced us into a state of stillness. Many periods of my life have thus been centered on trying to escape the obsession with being productive, which necessitated accepting my own ordering of time outside of the capitalist time paradigm of work and value.

Rather than the capitalist formula of time defined by a beginning, middle, and end, attaining acceptance is a process that does not follow a strictly linear path. In trying to work with and accept a perceived weakness or failure successfully, it might be more useful to conceptualize time as spherical, not linear. Navigating the sphere depends on the constant movement of striving towards balance, whether the balance is between two points, two dimensions, two planes, or even six planes. Rather than believing balance is achieved once and for all, we need to understand that balance is something that will always need consistent movement, though not always of a physical or literal nature. The Lenus of the world might be frightened when confronting structures that don't have a definable end or reward. But because these structures reek of the rigidity and necessity of capitalist production, and we currently face a time of pause outside of said production, these structures compromise our present concepts of reality. I believe that those who have experienced the many shades of mental duress before the pandemic have already grappled with existential meanings of personal worth and therefore carry somewhat of an advantage stemming from past experiences.

In particular, the timelines imposed on those diagnosed with mental illness reach a point of incoherence while attempting to mediate the prognoses and identities of the illness. These identities automatically challenge our simplistically accepted realities of normative capitalist time and their intimately linked projections of productivity. In considering temporality through disability theory, Alison Kafer (2013) argues:

> During that period [of diagnosis], past/present/future become jumbled, inchoate. The present takes on more urgency as the future shrinks; the past

> becomes a mix of potential causes of one's present illness or a succession of wasted time; the future is marked in increments of treatment and survival even as "the future" becomes more tenuous" (p. 37).

Because our mental illnesses are seen as something inherently bad that will limit productivity, capitalist structures of time exacerbate our worries of "wasted time" and (not) being productive. Through this process of diagnosis, we have to rearrange and challenge normative notions of time in order to accept and live through our new identities of mental illness; of being Crazy.

I have firmly centered my belief around mental illness from my experiences in the rabbit hole of psychiatric diagnoses, not on the concept of weakness or insanity, but the complexities in adapting to shifting or challenging systems of living. I believe that many mental illness cases become medicalized when a behavioral pattern that served someone in extreme or traumatic circumstances is no longer advantageous, or the reverse: when a behavioral pattern that served someone in non-extreme or non-traumatic circumstances is no longer advantageous. The old behavioral patterns then present roadblocks in living according to the new paradigmatic circumstances. Therefore, these cases of "mental illness" cannot be fully addressed through the discourse of all-encapsulating solutions, especially not through bio-medicine. Like Lila's ability to dissolve boundaries, immense strength can result in weakness and vice versa, so how can we justifiably define Lila as "mentally ill"? Relapse, or rather, vacillating between two ways of coping, is almost a guarantee, not an exception. Unfortunately, when we do relapse, we are instructed to believe this is a failure. But it is only a failure if we continue to use the dominant time structure of capitalist temporality: the linear process of a beginning, middle, and end.

It is imperative to recognize experimentation as foundational in our pursuits towards balance. Solutions and failures are never found outside of contextual reasoning, just as the problems urging us to change are never acontextual. We must consider our positionings as gendered, racialized, sexualized, classed, and geographically organized beings within constantly changing socio-political contexts and mental spaces; an incredibly arduous task that always seems to evade appreciation. This means we are constantly experimenting with lines, figures, logics, emotions, and ontologies that change shape through failure and success, perhaps at the same time. Failure is never failure by itself if we continue to challenge the rigid orthodoxy of oppressive structures that limit our capacities to flow and shift into different modes of being.

Suicidal ideation forces people to go through the apocalypse every time they truly want to die, because, like the apocalypse, their world is coming to an end. Everyone who faces suicide has faced the kind of fear arising from persecution and imminent mortality from within. We experience the pain of isolation without a mandated order to isolate. We experience rejection without others openly rejecting us. We know the feeling that the world is soon coming to an end. Not every suicidal person recognizes the need for balance, but rather, we have all faced the end of what was once our being and therefore know from experience what this reckoning entails, and sometimes, how to cope and withstand the blows. Now the rest of the world is becoming aware of what we have long experienced.

Much like the converging differences between Lila and Lenu, the lives of the mentally ill and the lives of the mentally well are built from different materials but are shaped by similar hands of trauma. I believe that the converging of mental realities in the current context of COVID-19 proves that the mentally ill are not in fact ill but have developed different strategies in confronting certain challenges and reality disruptions. We all must experience not being okay, and to live within the terror of the unstable unknown, but we also must find a way to fight back against that which is destroying our individual and communal well-being. We are all now living in an extreme world, and everyone in it, whether mentally unwell or medically sane, is experiencing the blurring of boundaries.

References

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Author biography

Celia is a white settler living in Sacramento, California on the unceded lands of the Nisenan people. She is an MA candidate in Anthropology at York University (Faculty of Liberal Arts and Professional Studies) interested in intersectional social justice movements organized against white settler colonialism, and how girlhood is constructed, negotiated, and contested through these movements. She is specifically interested in understanding the experiences and practices of sumud, or steadfastness, articulated in the political imaginaries of Palestinian refugee girls who, as both Indigenous and racialized, continue to be under- or mis-represented through neo-Orientalist and Zionist humanitarian projects. Celia received a BA in Anthropology and Psychology at the University of California, Santa Cruz, where she organized in and led the Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) chapter, as well as several other social justice-oriented networks and organizations within the greater Santa Cruz community. She is currently working as an editor for *Contingent Horizons: The York University Student Journal of Anthropology*.