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My Heart is My Head: Mad-Femme Romantic Assemblages in Queer Men's Socio-Sexual Applications

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Within queer men's socio-sexual applications, such as Scruff or Grindr, romantic love and emotional attachment are typically feminized and deemed excessive. Men who become attached emotionally and romantically to their sexual partners through their sexuality experience sanist and femmephobic derisions that construct their attachments as irregular, feminine, and potentially "unhealthy." Following Jason Jacobs' (2020) work on the regulation of romantic and sexual attachments in queer men's socio-sexual cultures, this article brings Mad Studies and Femme Theory together to argue for the importance of Mad-Femme analytics of queer men's online socio-sexual cultures. Through this, the article explores the author's Mad-Femme autobiographical poetry writing as a form of Mad-Femme resistance that conceptualizes desire and romantic love as productive and reclaims the madness, femininity, and excess typically associated with romantic love within queer men's socio-sexual cultures and communities.

Introduction

I have always felt as though my madness[1] and femininity were parts of my subjectivity that needed to be contained. Struggling to restrain my feminine hand mannerisms, the expression of my emotions and vulnerability with other people, as well as my romantic attachments, I navigated my twenties within queer men's hook-up cultures as best as any queer Mad Femme man could[2]—not very well. Beginning to use Grindr, the most popular gay socio-sexual application (i.e., hook-up application) as soon as I came out to my friends and family before my twenty-first birthday, I soon learned that my emotions and feelings, particularly when navigating online queer hook-up cultures, had to be *contained* and *regulated*.

In his theoretical writing on "an excess of love" in gay men's sexual cultures, communications scholar Jason Jacobs describes how visible significations of emotion, particularly emotional attachments, are "a persistent excess in gay men's culture, a remainder that defies the neatness of relationship schemas (either normative, countercultural, or a blend of the two), and a line of force cutting across life arrangements in productively disruptive ways" (2020, 33). Jacobs' work calls for analyses of the construction of emotional attachments and romantic love as "excess" or excessive in gay men's sexual networks. Through an analysis of gay couples' engagement with sexually open practices in the form of "neatly" separating their romantic attachments to, and sexual engagements with, other men, Jacobs emphasizes how sexual non-monogamy is a form of gay cultural practice. Such a gay cultural practice signifies membership within gay cultures and communities since "this separation [between emotional attachment and sexuality] is something gay men must do, must do with caution and care and discipline, must not ever fail to do" (Jacobs 2020, 32). In this sense, the non-containment of gay sexualities through emotionally compartmentalized and neatly defined relationship

schemas (i.e., compartmentalizing romantic/emotional and sexual attachments) has become the norm for gay men to remain romantically and emotionally monogamous but sexually non-monogamous and open (Jacobs 2020). Instead of calling for a return to both romantic and sexual monogamy, Jacobs asks for gay sexual cultures that allow for romantic love and excessive emotional attachment, resisting the urge to compartmentalize one's sexual, emotional, and romantic self.

Jacobs describes how the supposed "neatness of relationship schemas" in gay sexual cultures demands the containment and control of emotional attachments and feelings (2020, 33). He notes how the "unruliness of emotions" might hold some kind of promise in disrupting common associations between sexual openness and liberation (2020, 32); that is, Jacobs argues that within gay men's sexual cultures, sexual openness amongst couples might promote a form of regulatory mechanism that positions those who do not—or cannot—compartmentalize their emotional attachments from their sexuality as abnormal. I conceptualize this regulatory mechanism as highly connected to sanist and femmephobic structures that deem gay men who do not compartmentalize their sexuality from their emotional attachments as feminine gender failures and even "insecure," "needy," or lacking in self-confidence (Davies 2021). These discourses are also, of course, products of neoliberal individualistic discourses that devalue relationality within gay hook-up cultures.

As someone who experiences mental health challenges and has various mental health diagnoses, containing my emotions and regulating my romantic attachments has been a lifelong struggle. In this article, I align myself with the identity marker "Mad" to represent my orientation and activist stance that critiques psychiatry, psychology, and the pathologization of emotions, feelings, behaviours, and sensations that are deemed "abnormal" (LeFrançois et al. 2013) through processes of pathologization (Kirby 2014; Lewis 2016; Tosh 2017). Throughout this article, when I use the term, "pathologization," I draw from work at the intersections of the regulation of madness and gender and sexuality to describe social processes and medicalized norms that construct certain gender diverse behaviours, forms of self-expression, identities, and communication as "deviant" and a problem that requires change through intervention (Kirby 2014; Lewis 2016; Tosh 2017; Yakas 2023). Experiences of pathologization can occur through institutions, such as psychiatry and social services professionals, and/or within everyday behaviours and interactions.

As Yakas (2023) notes, pathologization is something that is experienced by people through having their behaviours, thoughts/feelings, and mental traits deemed pathological by others. Pathologization can be furthered considered through a frame of social relations in terms of the everyday processes and relations that normalize forms of social control (Liebert 2014). Such processes of *pathologizing* behaviours that are deemed excessive through sanist and femmephobic discourses occurred in my life narrative between: (1) myself and psy-professionals (therapists, counsellors, psychiatrists); (2) myself and friends and peers; and (3) myself and romantic and/or sexual partners. While I provide these three realms in the following narrative, I admit that this phenomenon certainly occurs beyond these areas in many individuals' lives. In this article, however, I emphasize how within these listed contexts, there was a form of social control enacted that deemed my emotions and feelings a problem and therefore, a pathology and in need of medical intervention (Liebert 2014; Yakas 2023). As well, while I use the term 'men' throughout this article, I am describing gendered dynamics that impact and affect both cisgender and transgender queer men, although in differing ways.

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Introducing My Story

Ever since I was a young child, I have experienced intense scrutiny of my emotions and feelings, been deemed "too sensitive," and in particular, through dominant norms for masculinity, have had my openness and vulnerability with my emotions questioned and labelled as potential signifiers of "mental illness." I use "mental illness" in quotation marks here to acknowledge the contested nature of constructions of mental illness, which are often biologized as absolute truths, despite research debating the genetic nature of "mental illness" (Burstow 2015; LeFrançois 2020; Maté and Maté 2022). My sensitivity and emotionality typically led to bullying in school contexts, where other boys would tease me and call me a "fag," indicating how my emotions were coded as more feminine (Pascoe 2011). And as such, I became a "feminine" target and began internalizing dominant norms that asked me to regulate my care, sensitivity, and vulnerability with others (Hoskin 2020; Matheson et al. 2021).

However, as I navigated academia and higher education, in particular graduate studies, I became exposed to both Femme and Mad as analytics and identities. Femme, as a queer term of reclamation originating from Femme lesbian communities of the 1940–1950s (Brightwell and Taylor 2021; Eves 2004; Hoskin 2021; Nestle 1992), embraces femininity and challenges the regulation of femmephobia, as well as notions of femininity as inferior or as a devaluation (Hoskin 2017, 2020). Hoskin describes how,

> femmephobia is composed of containment strategies that function to maintain the proper boundaries of patriarchal femininity and, in turn, gender norms. Thus, femmephobia not only maintains femininity's subordinated status, but is also a regulatory power used in the maintenance of gender hegemony (2019, 2).

Gender hegemonies are maintained through hierarchies that position white heterosexual cisgender rationality as ideal, which is commonly associated with Reason, Enlightenment, and modern rationality (Bruce 2017; Connell 1995; de Boise 2016). As Hoskin and Blair articulate, "within western dichotomous ways-of-knowing, masculinity is coded as rational and stoic; the combination of which make up notions of objectivity" (2022, 2). Femme theory values and politicizes vulnerability and interdependence by considering interdependence, care, and relationality as political mechanisms (Schwartz 2018, 2020, 2022). Such an emphasis on relationality mobilizes forms of social support and systemic change that disrupt gender hegemonies, which position independence as ideal and devalue feminine relationality (Davies and Hoskin 2021; Hoskin and Whiley 2023; Schwartz 2018, 2020, 2022). Upon encountering Femme Theory (Hoskin 2017; Schwartz 2018, 2020, 2022), I found language to describe the experiences I've navigated with gender policing, surveillance, and the devaluation of my femininity.

I have felt the need to contain my emotional and romantic attachments and feelings throughout my entire life, with particular struggles to contain my feelings while dating and hooking up with other gay men. Navigating Grindr and witnessing profiles articulating how other gay men were looking for "drama free guys" and "no strings attached" left an imprint on me that my feelings and desires for romantic intimacy were unwanted and inherently wrong. These phrases, often imbued with sanism and femmephobia, deem any "excessive" expression of feelings problematic and romantic attachments as undesirable. This goes with a long lineage of associations between femininity and diagnoses, such as hysteria (Ussher 2017). While I

would try to hook up without having any feelings or care for the men that I was sleeping with, my desire for some form of emotional and/or romantic connection typically crept in. I would begin becoming fearful of "scaring away" someone with my feelings. *Did I say too much?* My visits to counsellors and therapists would predominately focus on my fast attachments to other men and my desire for a romantic relationship or connection. Leaving these sessions, I often felt invalidated and pathological—like there must have been something *wrong* with me. Friends would tell me that I needed to control my feelings and attachments and try to *detach* myself from those who I was sleeping with. However, attempts at containing and regulating my feelings felt inauthentic and I yearned for a soft and gentle climate where my desire for emotional and romantic connections was welcomed.

Femme Theory and Mad Studies: Analyzing Excess within Gay Socio-Sexual Applications

In this article, I place Femme Theory (Hoskin 2017, 2020, 2021; Schwartz 2018, 2020, 2022) and Mad Studies (Beresford and Russo 2021; LeFrançois et al. 2013) in conversation to investigate and analyze personal autobiographical experiences using gay socio-sexual applications. Gay socio-sexual applications—most notably, Grindr and Scruff, and other applications commonly used by gay and queer folks—are frequently described as spaces where hegemonic masculinities and the regulation and devaluation of femininity (femmephobia) occur (Davies 2021; García-Gomez 2020). While femmephobia as it pertains to self-presentation and femmephobic statements, such as "Masculine guys only" (Miller and Behm-Morawitz 2015) or "no fats, no femmes, no Asians" (Conte 2018; Davies et al. 2023; Davies 2023a, 2023b), are more often discussed in the research literature (Miller 2018; Miller and Behm-Morawitz 2020), there is little literature that discusses the pathologization of romantic relationships or emotional expression online (c.f. Elder et al. 2015) and how significations of potential romantic and emotional attachments are feminized, pathologized (i.e., through discourses of "neediness" and being "too attached"), and ultimately, deemed excessive.

By placing Femme Theory and Mad Studies in conversation within this article, I critique the common divide between emotional attachment and gay sexualities (Jacobs 2020). As such, I take the regulation of emotional and romantic attachments within gay socio-sexual applications and sexual cultures widely as a point where femmephobia and sanism ultimately take place, or as Jacobs describes in his analysis of gay men's emotional and sexual intimacies within pop culture, it is gay men's "emotional attachments that are most to be feared, controlled, and forestalled" (2020, 32). As Edwards (1994, 2005) writes, the history of gay men's sexual cultures is littered with glorifications of hegemonic masculinity and in particular, the devaluation of gay men who desire romantic intimacy (see also Davies 2021). Such histories are further glorified by the Gay Liberation movement and in particular, the "Gay Clone" archetype that became popularized in 1970s San Francisco, of someone who was known to be continually looking for anonymous sexual interactions in cruising cultures while showing off his highly masculinized physique and butch aesthetic (Edwards 2005; Levine 1998).

The Pathologization of Gender and Sexual Diversity through the DSM

It is important to note gay men's histories of pathologization through diagnostic criteria, which has taken particular aim at gay men's femininity (Drescher 2015). Such histories, which include

research on male femininity in childhood that associated the development of homosexuality in adult males with effeminacy as a child, continued the legacy of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (*DSM*) (American Psychiatry Association 2013) and psychiatric knowledges' pathologization of male femininity (Kuhl and Martino 2018). As Jane Ussher (2013) illustrates, femininity has been historically pathologized by psychiatry through gendered constructions that link feminine gender expression with hysteria, nervousness, and narcissism in women, which has continued into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries with diagnoses in the *DSM*, such as histrionic personality disorder and borderline personality disorder (BPD).

The *DSM*, as well as the various casebooks produced to accompany the *DSM* and guide professionals' practice, have employed gender essentialist dichotomies that construct gay men through ideas of "passivity" and "activity" that inherently link male femininity with passivity, gender inversion, and pathology (Margolin 2023). Within and amongst gay men's communities, these gender essentialist notions that increase stigma towards feminine gay men are perpetuated and extend pathology towards feminine gay men through in-group discrimination (Davies 2020; Kiebel et al. 2020). As such, gay men might associate emotional independence and a lack of emotional attachment and/or romantic commitment to their sexual partners with masculinity, and thereby distance themselves from other gay men who openly desire a romantic relationship (Lamarche et al. 2020). This distancing can increase feelings of shame and failure in men who do not abide by these norms within gay sexual cultures (Greene and Britton 2015). Since dating and hook-up applications, such as Grindr, are constructed as more impersonal and discreet spaces, men who are too "conversational" or who are uninterested in hooking up are outside the masculinized codes of these applications (Arthur and Cabaniss 2021). Yet, the usage of Grindr, in particular, is considered a common component of gay identity and experience, which includes the *felt* necessity to participate within gay online hook-up cultures and potentially conceal one's desire for a romantic relationship (Jaspal 2017). As such, there becomes a paradox where many men might use Grindr out of feeling that it is a necessary part of gay identity and community but may not wish to conform to the online norm for anonymous hooking up (Davies 2021).

The Containment of Madness and Femininity

Accordingly, femininity in gay men is constructed as in need of regulation and containment, which also presents itself in particular ways, such as the requirement to denigrate and devalue men who do not participate in hook-up cultures (Edwards 1994; Davies 2021; Davies et al. 2023). It is the excess of gay men's femininity and the biomedical desire to contain emotions, feelings, and affects that are considered signifiers of mental "illness" that I address in this article. In particular, given the sexual and emotional scripts of gay men's sexual communities (Elder et al. 2015), emotional and/or romantic attachment *through* one's sexuality is considered potentially pathological and feminizes gay men as a failure through hegemonic ideas of gay men's sexualities (Jacobs 2020). As such, the Cartesian divide between gay and queer men's sexual subjectivities and emotional and romantic attachments is the central critique of this article, as well as how pathologization occurs through excessive romantic and attachments, or desire for romantic and emotional attachment (Jacobs 2020).

As Robert Menzies, Bren LeFrançois, and Geoffrey Reaume (2013) describe, Mad Studies "subsumes a loose assemblage of perspectives that resist compression into an irreducible dogma or singular approach to theory or practice" (13). I think with Mad Studies in

this autobiographical article to theorize and critique my experiences of pathologization within gay and queer men's sexual communities and with medical practitioners. As Sarah Snyder et al. write, "Mad Studies is a reminder that we must consider the dialectical and affective intensifications that make up any experience" (2019, 488). In particular, Mad Studies critiques bio-medical, psychiatric, and psychotherapeutic logics that essentialize and biologize mental "illness" while always casting mental distress and difference as only a pathology (LeFrançois et al. 2013). In this sense, I draw from Mad studies in my work to comprehend the full affective elements of my experiences using gay dating and hook-up applications and how my feelings and romantic attachments have been pathologized by both medical and psychotherapeutic professionals I have encountered, as well as other gay and queer men within my sexual communities.

Critiquing "Secure'" Attachment

My thinking with Mad studies is also with the intention of critiquing the gendered psychological and psychiatric discourses that identify notions of normative, or "secure" attachment styles within interpersonal relationships. The commonplace discussions of Mary Ainsworth's and John Bowlby's (1991) developmental theorizing of mother/child attachment relationships has become an embedded component of everyday pop psychology and dating and relationship advice writing. For example, psychiatrist Amir Levine and psychologist Rachel S.F. Heller (2011) wrote the book, *Attached: The New Science of Adult Attachment and How it Can Help You Find – and Keep – Love*, along with other popular psychologists and therapists from social media. Levine and Heller (2011) draw from Bowlby and Ainsworth's (1991) theorizing of secure attachment dynamics between mothers and children to describe how adults can develop secure attachment dynamics within romantic relationships. While secure attachment is typically thought of as something that was created during infancy, it is associated with feelings of self-confidence, autonomy, agency, and independence in adulthood (Wonderly 2019). Modern attachment theorists, whether in psychology or philosophy, tend to conceptualize security as a feeling one can feel through proximity to their object of desire—that is, without the object of desire nearby or consistent connection, one can start to feel "unwell" or insecure in their day-to-day life (Wonderly 2022).

Empirical research regarding gay men's attachment styles often connects "gender nonconformity" and "insecure attachment," seeking to draw connections between feminine gender expression, childhood rejection, and adult insecure attachment style (e.g., Landolt et al. 2004). Sex research often investigates gay men's relationships through frames that associate anxiety and insecurity with gender nonconformity and feminine expression, in particular arguing that separation anxiety is associated with feminine self-expression and identifying as a "bottom," or as a receptive sexual partner (Swift-Gallant et al. 2022). What is important to note is how this line of research conflates attachment anxiety and femininity as sources of *pathology* in gay men, therefore stigmatizing interdependency and devaluing and regulating femininity through femmephobia. As such, I connect sanism—the devaluation of people who experience mental "illness" and experiences of mental distress (Perlin 1992; Poole et al. 2012; LeBlanc and Kinsella 2016)—with femmephobia, or the regulation and devaluation of femininity, in particular within gay and queer men's sexual communities. As Schwartz astutely points out, "Expressing emotions or the desire for interdependence is then understood in terms of pathology and becomes feminised (for example, 'crazy,' 'clingy,' or 'needy')" (2022, 44). I place

Mad studies and Femme Theory in conversation to dismantle logics that seek the containment of madness and femininity and use Mad femininity to challenge masculinist logics that desire regulation and construct femininity or feminization as a failure (Hoskin and Taylor 2019). Or, put otherwise, as Shayda Kafai notes, "a mad femme politic is a communal, luscious, and glittery triumph against normative categories that discipline our bodyminds" (2019, 8). In the following Mad Femme autobiographical poetic writing, I challenge the dominant sanist and masculinist logics that have devalued my emotions, sensations, feelings, and labelled them as medical pathologies, and my femininity as a lack or deficit.

Mad Femme Autobiographical Poetics

Mad autobiographical poetic writing methodologically draws from the work of Mad activist, poet, writer, and academic, phil smith (2018, 2020), who emphasizes autobiographical, Mad, non-linear writing that emphasizes affect and unique forms of writing, or "writhing." smith describes "writhing" by articulating how it is:

> a new writing
> a new writhing
> a new exciting
> a new inviting
> a new delighting language
> tongue languishing
> languid
> body sandwiching
> cultural way uv be-ing nod a pidgin
> nod a dialect
> (smith 2018, 152)

Mad autopoetic writing challenges positivist conventions of research and writing and brings Mad stories to the forefront of public consciousness without constraining such stories to the traditional conventions of academic writing (smith 2018, 2020). smith describes how his "work has been increasingly opposed to the representation of knowledge and exploration that is academified" (2018, 30). As such, Mad autobiographical poetic writing is for the purpose of *honouring* and validating Mad experiences, subjectivities, and writing, without seeking to conform to the traditional confines of academia (smith 2018). Often, Mad autobiographical poetic writing deals with how Mad subjects (re)construct meaning through the systems that seek to constitute their subjectivities through pathology (Davies 2023c). For example, Cosantino (2023) describes the constitution of their Mad trans subjectivity as "co-occurring phenomena:"

> To name my Mad and trans embodiment
> as co-occurring phenomena that shape
> the ways I inhabit the world
> and construct and reconstruct meaning
> in the spaces and places that affirm
> the complexities of my wholeness
> and/or violently deny me access (Cosantino 2023, 5)

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Mad autobiographical poetics directly speak back to the medical and psychiatric interventions that seek to deny Mad people their/our "wholeness" and strive to imagine a new future beyond medical psychiatrization (Cosantino 2023). smith's (2018, 2020) writing directly speaks back to constructions of Mad people and madness as "broken" by imagining madness beyond and outside of typical notions of brokenness:

> The medical model posits that some people are broken
> and that brokenness is inherent to individual people
> part of them.
> The medical model asserts that this brokenness –
> the thing we call disability –
> can be fixed
> or at least ameliorated
> through a variety of technological, professionalised
> practices and tools (smith 2018).
>
> It is also eminently clear that Madness operates in the same
> (but not identical)
> kinds of ways (smith 2020, 371).

Throughout what follows in this article, my Mad Femme autobiographical poetic writing seeks to challenge dominant positivist and medicalized notions that my madness must be "fixed" or intervened into. Methodologically, my poetic writing connects the tenets of vulnerable life writing from both Mad Studies (Cosantino 2023; LeFrançois et al. 2013; smith 2018) and Femme Theory (Hoskin 2017, 2021; Schwartz 2020, 2022). Drawing methodologically from Andi Schwartz's (2020) "soft femme" theorizing, my Mad Femme autobiographical writing seeks to "engage in the femme negotiation of vulnerability, to create a discourse of healing, and to pose a challenge to masculinist and neoliberal norms" (Schwartz 2020, 3). My Mad Femme autobiographical poetic writing draws from affective tenets of Femme Theory, such as emotionality, vulnerability, and relationality (Schwartz 2020, 2), to consider "being vulnerable or open with others about one's negative feelings is positioned as a radical act that disrupts the status quo" (Schwartz 2022, 50).

While I do identify as Femme and with Femme communities, my writing focuses on the affective elements of femininity, which, as Hannah McCann and Whitney Monaghan (2020) theorize, involve "the material elements of belonging (the way things feel, embodiment, and so forth) that cannot be reduced to identity in any discrete form" (2020, 177). This Mad Femme poetic writing embraces "ugly" feelings, which indicate the Femme position as a failure (Schwartz 2018; Hoskin and Taylor 2019). Similarly, Kafai theorizes how instead of "framing feeling as shameful, feminine, and nonacademic, politicizing femme queers language and reminds us to unlearn" (2021, 3). As such, my Mad Femme writing resists logics of victimization while still describing the very real circumstances by which feminization is associated with abjection and rejection, or as Walker (2012) articulates, reinforces dichotomies between a more normative femininity that is a "victim" and a queer self-identified Femme who is agentic.

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Autobiographical Poetics on the Heart and the Head

Much of my dating and romantic experiences using gay hook-up and dating applications, such as Grindr, taught me that my emotions, feelings, and romantic attachments were "excessive," "too much," or occurred "too soon" (Davies 2021). Navigating dating within a large urban city in Canada became quite difficult as I started seeking psychiatric and psychotherapeutic assistance to manage and regulate my feelings and romantic attachments as I entered into dating (Davies 2021). Terms, such as "attachment trauma" and "relationship OCD" circulated with mental health professionals as I engaged with Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, Dialectical Behavioural Therapy, and received pharmaceutical prescriptions to manage my feelings of emptiness, loneliness, and attachments to others. Within gay dating circles, I would commonly receive feedback that I was becoming attached "too soon" (i.e., after a few dates), that I was seeking a relationship when I needed to "love myself more" (i.e., I was *lacking* in self-love and therefore becoming *too* dependent or attached) (Davies 2021). Whatever the feedback was, my feelings were usually dysregulated, I was too feminine or not masculine enough, and my feelings and emotions were ultimately "unruly."

Specifically, my Mad Femme poetic writing is in conversation with Schwartz's (2020) writing on the affective elements of Femme Theory to emphasize "softness as a combination of emotionality, vulnerability, relationality, and hyperfemininity" (Schwartz 2020, 2). This writing strives to deconstruct Cartesian divides between mind and body, whereby the mind is the masculinist realm of cognition and reason. By writing on the heart and head divide that often rhetorically represents the pull between so-called emotionality and rationality, my Mad Femme autobiographical poetics follow Schwartz's soft Femme Theory in desiring a "more nuanced and capacious understanding of the political potential of femininity" (Schwartz 2022, 2). Such forms of femme-inist attentions to affect and feelings place emotional sensitivity and "soft feelings" at the forefront and challenge masculinist logics that draw neat divides between sensitivity and strength (Schwartz 2020). In what follows, I engage with a piece of my Mad Femme autobiographical poetic writing to illustrate forms of resistance to the logics of containment that have tried to regulate my madness and femininity within gay dating and hook-up applications. Before the reader continues, I encourage them to engage with my poetics with care and caution as there are experiences described relating to gender-based violence, psychiatric gaslighting, sexual violence, and pharmaceutical intervention. Please do feel free to engage with whichever components of this article feel comfortable for you, or to revisit the article when it feels right.

my heart is my head

i opened the phone app
to find others like me
instead i was told
"i used to look like you, but i was unwanted"
"go to the gym more"
i just wanted a friend
my heart is my head

i tried to pretend i didn't care
but i reached out my hand
and was told it clung too much
"you need to get yourself fixed"
said the man
my heart is my head

"i want to make love to you," he said
"only if you love me," i said
as we laid throughout the hours
"don't touch me," he said upon waking up
"i never loved you" he told me
i tried to stop crying
my heart is my head

they told me i cared too much
that i internalize everything
"take this and you'll get better"
but i wouldn't and it didn't
my heart is my head

"you should have said no"
he told me, with a cold look in his eye
"you should have looked after yourself"
he uttered, as he wrote in his notebook
"only you can look after you" the counsellor warned
as tears fell from my eye
my heart is my head

i asked him to stop
"there's something wrong with you," he said
"gay men have sex. it's what we fought for," he informed me
"you must have some shame. i see your anxiety"
i just wanted some company
my heart is my head

when we talk of mental health
do we think of how we care for one another?
or is it simply a pill and goodbye
we cannot speak of the health of a mind
without looking at the kindness in one's soul
the next time someone asks about mental health
we need to ask instead:
"how is your heart?"

(Davies 2021, 6-7)

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Discussion: Mad-Femme Romantic Assemblages

Considering my Mad Femme poetry, I now turn to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's (1987) theorizing of *assemblages* to consider the potentialities that might emerge from Mad-Femme romantic assemblages, or assemblages that consider desire and love as productive. In her writing on Femme assemblages, Hannah McCann describes how Femme assemblages work towards "understanding belonging as connectivity and affect rather than focusing on visibility and representation" (2018, 287). In this sense, belonging is *felt* and emerges beyond signification and identification. McCann's (2018) work theorizes how Femme assemblages emphasize notions of feelings, affect, and belonging instead of relying on Femme as a form of representation or signification. McCann theorizes how femininity produces "feelings and attachments of at-home-ness," noting how it is feelings of belonging, instead of identity-based politics, that produce Femme assemblages (2018, 285).

McCann draws from Deleuze and Guattari (1987) and Jasbir Puar (2007) in her theorizing of Femme assemblages, noting how "exclusion is rooted in differences between the sensorial and tactile bodies that are inhabited, rather than just being a factor of appearance and signification" (2018, 286). As such, Femme assemblages are affective and beyond linguistic description—that is, Femme assemblages are oriented towards feelings and sensations instead of identity and representation (McCann 2018). In a similar vein, Ulrika Dahl notes how "We cannot simply stay on it or insist on an essence beneath it; we must think of sensations, intensities and the force of desire in figuring Femme as an assemblage, a desiring machine with particular orientations" (2017, 50). The question becomes about what Femme and femininity *does* instead of what it *is* (McCann 2018).

Deleuze and Guattari (1987) note how desiring-machines challenge psychoanalytic notions of desire as a *lack*, instead noting desire as productive and relational. Here, I take and (re)think my Mad-Femme poetry as forms of *Mad-Femme romantic assemblages* that are *productive* instead of excessive. Assemblage theory allows me to think about excess and vulnerability in a way that is non-pathological and always in flow, therefore continually challenging strict dualistic divides. Jacobs, at the end of his writing on gay men's sexual cultures, questions how "an excess of love threatens—or does it promise?—to return us, finally, to queerness" (2020, 45). If romantic love, or emotional attachment—not that the two are the exact same—are the *excess* in gay men's sexual cultures, the Mad-Femme romantic assemblages within my poetic writing might also signify a way forward that reclaims madness and femininity beyond identity politics.

If romantic love and/or emotional attachments—particularly through one's sexuality—are commonly constructed as *excessive* in gay men's online sexual cultures and communities through logics of regulation and compartmentalization (Jacobs 2020), the Mad-Femme romantic assemblages within my poetic writing resist such logics and offer new opportunities for thinking about madness and femininity. In her writing on madness and affect, Rachel Gorman notes how "to take the appearance of affect as essential is to theorize madness as a quintessential mode of being, rather than as a name for an assemblage of an individual's engagements with sedimented formations of social/cultural relations" (2017, 310). In the Mad-Femme romantic assemblages of my Mad-Femme poetry, madness and femininity are not (merely) signified through representation or visibility, but are affective intensities that are unpredictable, emergent, and highly relational.

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Within and through the assemblages of my writing, madness, and femininity are productive, and associated with the desire for romantic love, and deconstruct commonplace divides between the mind and the body. The assemblages within this poetic writing work against logics of regulation and containment by offering promise, or potentiality, in emotional and romantic connection. Instead of attempting to ascribe madness or femininity as explanative of my experiences (i.e., being rejected because of my femininity, or experiencing "attachment anxiety" as a cause of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, etc.), these Mad-Femme romantic assemblages seek to honour and validate these experiences in their multiplicity and the connections that occur through madness and femininity. It is through my experiences of non-belonging that I began searching for connection and community outside of gay men's sexual communities. It is also through these Mad-Femme assemblages that my queer subjectivity became dislodged. Does desiring a romantic connection mean that one cannot be queer or is not queer *enough*? As McCann notes, "rather than making queerness an identity that is founded within an extremely discrete and bounded location, searching for commonality extends queerness outward" (2018, 290). In this sense, my queerness continually reached outwards—despite how my femininity and desire for romantic connection was commonly pathologized by other men—and sought others who I might be in community and relation with. By encountering the vulnerability and relationality of Mad and Femme communities, I have found kinship within and outside of those gay men's communities and cultures.

In his autoethnographic writing on experiences of/with psychosis, Matthew Johnston describes how "Words collapsed into chaos; I became a body without organs, speaking and hearing without coherent articulation while still functioning as an assemblage made up of deteriorating part" (2020, 151). In my experience, this rings true. The more that I attempted to express to mental health professionals the loneliness and anxiety I was experiencing, the more I became medicated, pathologized, and dismissed. As Ussher (2017) articulates, positive mental health has been historically—and is still currently—associated with masculinity whereas feminized forms of emotional expression, such as crying, sadness, or anxiety, are deemed pathological or unhealthy. This type of gendered association is often embedded within the *DSM* definition of diagnoses, with those who are deemed "attention seeking," "emotionally dependent," or caught in "romantic fantasies," which involves a "dependent relationship" (Ussher 2017).

To return to Jacobs, if "gay men's ability to separate sex from emotion is often naturalized, evoked as a basic feature of gay men's gendered nature" (2020, 32), the excesses of emotional attachments and romantic feelings that emerge between and amongst gay men *through* their sexual interactions with other men might be a place of theorizing new ethics within and between gay men. In my Mad Femme poetry within this article, I described my experiences between: (1) myself and psy-professionals (therapists, counsellors, psychiatrists); (2) myself and friends and peers; and (3) myself and romantic and/or sexual partners. The therapists and psy-professionals who were working with me were often gay and queer men themselves, given my location at the time in a large urban city with ready access to queer professionals. Despite seeking professionals who might be able to empathize with my experiences and emotional distress, I often felt misunderstood for my desire for a romantic relationship, was told that my thoughts and feelings were distorted and signs of poor self-confidence and even encountered victim blaming from a therapist upon opening-up regarding experiencing sexual violence while using socio-sexual applications. The critical intersections of femmephobia and sanism, whether within my dating and sexual life or in encounters with queer

psy-professionals, left me feeling pathologized and that I needed to regulate and contain my emotions and feelings.

Still, the Mad-Femme assemblages within my poetic writing gesture towards vulnerable futures that value "soft" emotions and feelings, such as vulnerability, gentleness, and interdependency (Schwartz 2020, 2022). This writing follows in the Femme tradition of "laying bare one's body and lived experiences and connecting these experiences to larger social systems" (Schwartz 2022, 48). In particular, my Mad-Femme poetics and the assemblages within and beyond my writing refuse the privatization of my personal experiences of oppression and femmephobia/sanism and seek to imagine new, more relational futures within gay men's online dating and hook-up applications. As Kafai notes: "mad femme politics moves me resilient; it moves me tender. It encourages me to center collective access, the belief that we can communally articulate our bodymind needs without shame or stigma" (2021, 9). Through this writing, I imagine a Mad-Femme future for dating and hook-up applications, such as Grindr, where both madness and femininity can be valued and can be considered valuable ways of being and forms of existence, even in often hostile online climates and cultures (Kafai 2021).

In Conclusion: Embracing the Excess

This article has sought to shift the conversation regarding femmephobia and sanism within gay online hook-up and dating cultures towards a more relational and vulnerable imaginary that values femininity, vulnerability, and refuses pathologization. Using my Mad-Femme poetic writing as a framing device, my hope is that conversations regarding madness and femininity within gay men's sexual cultures can move away from notions of the containment and regulation of emotional and/or romantic attachments. Following Jacobs' argument that "sexual and emotional excess has an ethical value precisely because it persistently exceeds the boundaries of normative social life," I believe that thinking with Mad Studies and Femme theory in the context of experiences of gay men within dating and hook-up applications offers an opportunity to challenge dominant norms for "the neat spatialization of these two different experiences—love here and sex there; or sex out there and love safely secured over here" (2020, 47, 36). The *excess* that madness and femininity present, in particular affectively and emotionally, within gay dating and hook-up applications, can be thought to challenge the Cartesian divides between mind and body.

In the context of imagining new forms of subjectivity beyond Western liberal conceptions of humanism, Rosi Braidotti asks, "what kind of knowing subjects are we in the process of becoming and what discourses underscore the process?" (2019, 32). The Mad-Femme assemblages within this article motion towards new forms of subjectivity that value and affirm Femme and Mad futures. I envision a future whereby emotional connections, and the constructions of excessiveness that are associated with gay men's emotions, are not regulated or contained, but love and emotions are allowed to be unruly, while feminine affects and vulnerabilities are affirmed.

Notes

1. I use the term "madness" in this article in a reclaimed way in alignment with Mad Studies (LeFrançois et al. 2013), which critiques the pathologization and medicalization of feelings, behaviours, and thoughts that are deemed abject and in need of intervention.

2. I now identify as non-binary and use they/them pronouns. I use "gay" and "queer" men interchangeably often throughout this article; however, I do acknowledge that there are differences, and many prefer one of these terms over the other. Much of my thinking in this article is based upon my initial theorizing in my doctoral dissertation (Davies 2021), as well as the work of Jacobs (2020).

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