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## Being Psychotically Adept— Placing Change, the Poetic Self, and Community Arts Together

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By Luke Kernan

For some time now, I have been volunteering at a local mental health clinic known as Foundry. One of the activities I have become involved in at the clinic is a weekly drop-in arts therapy group for clients. As part of my volunteer work, I have been shadowing Noriko, one of Foundry's staff, in order to learn how to facilitate and design poetry workshops. In what follows, I discuss how the simplest of art projects became a conversation piece with youth attendees, and how it allowed them to engage with their own psychiatric histories and reclaim their autobiographies and selfhood by mapping out sensory experiences.

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In late 2018, a friend of mine gifted me with a blank journal with a floral design from a binding of Percy Bysshe Shelley's *The Sensitive Plant*. The journal's spirit resonated so much with me that I purchased a printing of Shelley's manuscript. As I looked pensively at the bare copy of *The Sensitive Plant* on my shelf, I started re-imagining it a little. I began to break with holding onto its form as a book, carving inside my mind a sea of flower-like shooting stars upon its desolate cover. An eerie sentiment of how one's desire alone can change the course of things and people struck inklings along my spine.



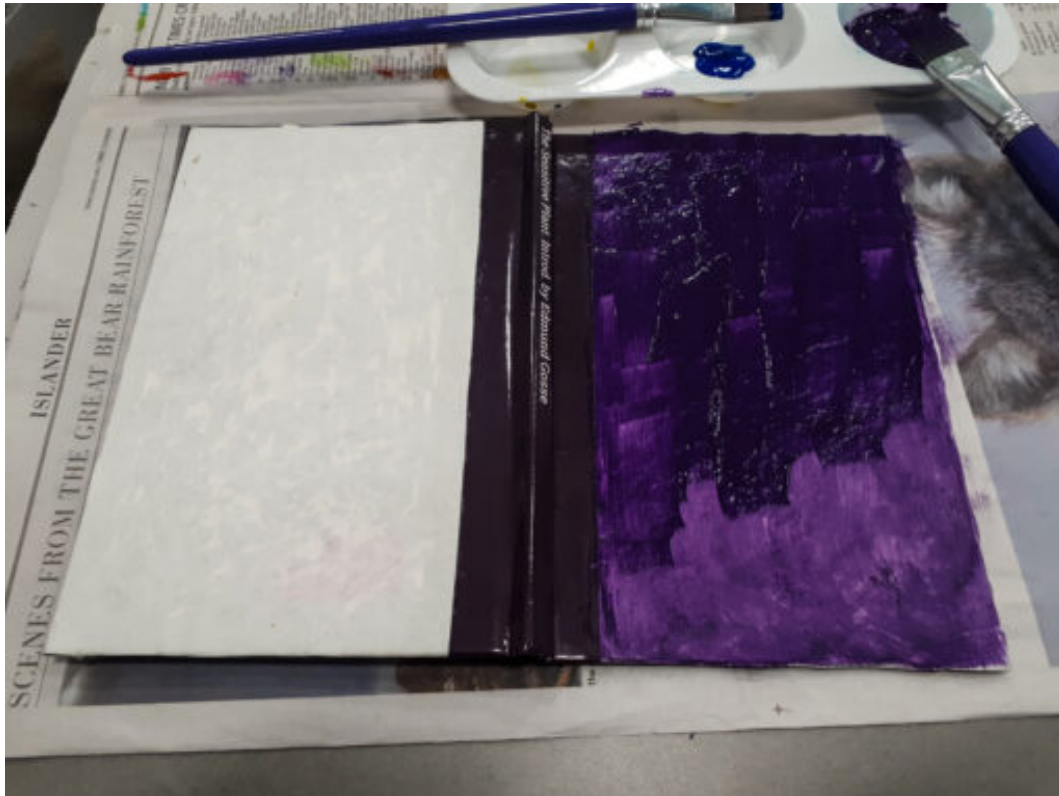
Dustcover painting interlaced with flower-star motif and created during a drop-in arts session. (All photos by author)

One Tuesday, I brought the book into Noriko's group. As I started to strip away all of the book's former material identity as a market-exchange object, I fixated on the creative process of fashioning a newly crafted dust cover. I latched onto the process of transforming the book through the magic of analogy and my own figurative sensibilities. In this way, I was able to see how imaginative acts could become vital forces in replotting and re-narrating how we view ourselves, bursting towards the more-ness of life like wildfire plants tendered by heat and story.



This image expands the theme of transformation within [Graham Green](#)'s (1954:) line, '[D]estruction after all is a form of creation.'

During the poetry workshops I ran at Foundry, my re-painted edition of *The Sensitive Plant* sparked discussion with youth attendees about art, language, and psychosis. I could see how their composition notebooks were capturing the flow of mental health states—and trials with how life expectations and reality were continually being broken and remade through their artistic journaling. Creativity allows individuals to engage with their own psychiatric histories and reclaim their autobiographies and selfhood by mapping out sensory experiences (Kernan 2020). This insight can be enabled through communal arts practices and the free-flowing powers of signification that arts-based therapies allow.



The glossy image of violet paint flowing over the book canvas reminds the poet of the deep purples and lilacs set to Alejandra Pizarnik's *Extracting the Stone of Madness* (1968).

Recently, my critical writings have explored the nuanced notion of what it means to be “psychotically adept.” I often find ways of expressing how people and bodies use psychosis as a site of normative disruption and knowledge-making rather than pure delusion, as psychiatry suggests by classifying and managing experiences from these states of reality. This kind of Mad-studies terminology tempers the cognitive bias within lack-of-insight discourses (Blak 2015; Reddy 2016; Sheffield 2018; David 2020). Psychotically adept individuals have shown themselves to slowly transform their self-image and identity through community arts practices, shifting their subjectivities amidst volumes of crippling personal vulnerabilities and overarching biomedical norms set against them. The raw power of arts-based, imaginative approaches centers on how storytelling and other creative activities can become political acts of self-representation. As psychiatric survivors forge meaningful frames of identity and relationality to harness and hone themselves, they grow instrumentally: where one envisions the path to their own becoming not only as otherwise but as a fluid potential moving within, across, and around states of partial wholeness (Biehl and Locke 2010, 2017).

Some of the youth poets who participate in the arts workshops have had past experiences with psychosis—and as stable outpatients, they look for



an expressive way to register and feel out these decisive moments through poetry. Psychosis widens human subjectivity, as the ontological horizons of the person are dismantled, outcasted, and altered in finding new subject positions to occupy; it presents an ever-changing nexus of existential questioning and imagining (Crapanzano, 2003). Ellen Corrin (2007) has been critical of how colonial biopolitics and the industrial psychiatric complex “obliterates the disquieting potential of psychosis [to question structures of] power” (302). Psychosis can engender sensitivities to critically re-register, re-question, and undo normativity and neuro-orthodoxies about how we construct a living, and it provides a counter-cultural sense of ontology and reality in response to suffering and systematic psychological pressures.

But first, we must listen to how these subtleties and the event of the ineffable remake these intelligibilities. And so, like any other Wednesday evening, I am sitting with Aaron and the other workshop attendees as we create a moment of “communal pondering” (Nelson 2017). He thinks over his psychological relapse—the bitter months after getting out of hospital—as he pauses intuitively to read the thirteenth thesis, “the work is the death mask of its conception,” (Benjamin 1986: 81) from the printed worksheet on the table. That is to say, each expression of ourselves in poetry and the world is not a finality but rather a way we can invite ourselves to be more than in the face of and in line with communal becoming, healing, and imagination.

One of the youth poets, Evelyn, spoke about her in-process poem’s winding structure that gelled together vibrantly with her ontological weaving of psychosis and addiction. Each became formative, ground-zeroing events that she retold within the mythopoetic span of her daughter’s birth. Her words ran forward like fast, impulsive rivers as Evelyn tried to illuminate the forking of in-and-out bodily cacophony and sensory anomalies that separated her lived awareness of time with language. Patiently, she found a place of her own and demanded connections in re-poem-ing the past months together. For many individuals like Evelyn, these sparse moments can predicate both catastrophe and disruption of one’s self-conceptualizations and chronology, overturning prior affordances of reality to how these events might subtly—and not-so-subtly—re-thread identity forward.

Anthropologists have observed how individuals who are shuffled through mental health and psychiatric services in North America become overly predetermined by the catastrophe and stigma of a psychotic break (Andreasen 1997; Kleinman 2009; Myers 2010). The [destabilizing](#) narratives that perpetuate these cognitive norms and social deaths can also lead to a disconcerting psychopharmacological consumer dependency. Annemarie Mol’s (2002) ethnographic work on

atherosclerosis shows how these biomedical epistemologies can problematize and participate in the reality of disease and illness to manifest its debilitating enactment(s)—which can also hold for mental health conditions. Psychosis and other anomalous experiences are frequently dictated by the terms and lived circumstances of their communication, which can produce “illness” identities within people (Berkhout et al. 2019). This becomes a pressing matter when looking toward people’s prognosis and ontic futures. Myers and Ziv (2016) document how this stripping away of a patient’s autobiographic power—the ability to self-narrate—constitutes an existential crisis. This invasive act can have detrimental iatrogenic health effects, especially for those who are already vulnerable. If anything, the time I have spent volunteering with art projects in community health settings as a fieldworker clarifies the unequivocal value and ethical need to create critical and creative spaces for coming to terms with these voices—to listen in earnest against past erasures.

One of the most exciting trends in medical anthropology is the politically charged nature of patient-lead storytelling initiatives—particularly, how patients emplot their futures, which can often counter biomedical orthodoxies (Small 2017). Art and poetics in these community settings become a means for re-narrating and re-imagining a future ontology through artwork that might invariably position a story user closer to a healthier and more holistic conceptualization of self. I saw how Nirrimi, one of the poetry workshop participants, elegantly demonstrated this process as she learned to re-narrate her body and interior landscapes away from self-destruction and the spectre of death (Bowles 2016) in fearlessly opening up about how a family member drowned at sea. Community arts workshops can empower one to re-story themselves through how they confront residual traces of pain and identity along a visionary future of wellness. Workshops also give special affordances for possible ontological re-integration into existing social roles. In embracing her peers’ forthright ability to witness her trauma, Nirrimi took the vibrant poetic makeup of her pain and the death-motif of the sea as a catalyst to explore emergent conceptions of the self in poetic story-worlds of play. Moments of psychosis, catastrophe, and madness can further elicit evocative sensory narratives, reformulating existing anthropological theories of becoming. This internal force of creativity becomes at once a conduit, a horizon, and a faculty for change, survival, and renewal—a process that is only further charged by psychosis. Madness can pivot to wisdom if we let it.

In Noriko’s art therapy groups and my poetry workshops, we all participated in the subtle and subversive acts of daily transformation as we imagined and re-worlded ourselves. I understand this facet to be a constant force of life, just as I am telling a story. I am sitting here stroking the velvet clothed pages of this copy of Shelley’s poetry—feeling through

this invocation to imagine myself and others growing as sensitive plants. Psychosis and its immersive sensory worlds that touch people's lives offer an expansive space in which to redefine the human as a category. To tell in paint and words of who we are. So much is still yet to be done in finding the symmetry in how all these micro-narratives unfold into ethnographic moments.

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I can hear the soft rustling of people at Foundry as its Youth Action Committee gets ready to mobilize for another World Mental Health Day celebration in Victoria. The nurses and youth coordinators long at work in preparing harm-reduction and psycho-education kits. The lights of Foundry's second floor flicker off as a psychiatrist from the Early Psychosis Intervention program considers the mounting cases piling at the reception desk—and what words of relief will come tomorrow.



Redesigned copy of *The Sensitive Plant* resonating through the darkness—as the stars of poetry hold us together.

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[Luke Kernan](#) (Ph.D. Student, University of Victoria) is a poet, mythographer, and graphic novelist. His doctoral work in anthropology explores sensory experiences of psychosis, and his ethnographic fieldwork will construct a sensorial narrative of what psychosis is like, i.e. a psychotic break, from arts-based workshops—to model these moments through comics and poetry. Luke has often featured as a spoken-word performer, and his poem, “Dictionary of the Lost,” will be published in Volume VII of [Déraciné](#). From the volunteer poetry workshop series

at [Foundry Victoria](#) (which are funded by the [Centre for Youth and Society](#) and the City of Victoria), he also plans to print a book anthology of youth poetry and art entitled *Unquiet Minds* to highlight these unique dialogues on mental health. Correspondences to [lkernan@uvic.ca](mailto:lkernan@uvic.ca). Twitter: [@lukekernan](#).

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