

MADNESS AND NEW METHODS IN THE AFRICAN (MEDICAL) HUMANITIES

NANCY ROSE HUNT

It was a great pleasure to join the University of Florida, its Department of History and especially its Center for African Studies this Fall. I have a profound sense of enriched intellectual space and a community within which to try out new things and complete some projects. Since my arrival, I have been busy exploring how I might help consolidate a network of UFL-based researchers in the medical, religious, textual, and visual humanities. While my own contributions may be related to the sequential arts in Kinshasa, this comic archive of an unusual vernacular street artist, Papa Mfumu'eto "le Premier," opens up questions of sorcery idioms, religious imaginations, text-image relations, and the autobiographical.

I am also completing a compact text for Oxford University Press that will be the first global history of health and medicine that privileges a focus on harm (rather than disease); it will also be the first to make African history a central strand. I am also gearing up to complete research for a cross-empire history of madness and psychiatry in Africa. This book will not aim for systematic comparison (if it did it would be impossible to finish), but it will ask what made colonial experiences under Belgian, British, French, Italian, Portuguese, and South African rule distinct from the interwar years on, and how do objective and figurative madness and the psychiatric sciences help us see living under these regimes in a new light. In many ways, it will be an experiment in examining archival form: again textual-visual relations will come into the analysis as will attention to the other senses. This Fall, I entered into the British colonial archives for the first time in search of materials. I have already tackled the French and some of the Belgian archives. In the coming academic year, I will begin to tackle Italian and Portuguese sources. It is important to realize African history is usually taught in terms of



British-French contrasts. Once in a while Belgian colonial rule is added to the mix. Portuguese and Italian Africa tend to get treated in isolation, and South Africa is not always even treated as a colonizing power. My book will be unusual, therefore, in thinking by counterpoint across the continent and back into diverse metropolises.

In treating madness in relation to idioms of racialization and distress, more than through carceral sites (asylums), it will seek out the strange and absurd, as much as the manic, the agitated, and the distraught. So far I have learned that among important issues that produced a documentary remains about madness or mental pathology in colonial archives were matters of who was going to pay for the care of a patient, white or black, as well as how to relocate them from initial site of being chained, confined, diagnosed, or calmed to a place deemed more appropriate for containment or care. One task will be to render this material interesting—but there are some fascinating, revealing stories already. Another challenge will be find sources that enable showing how Africans were organizing what we may call mental health care, though in many cases went with spirit possession, drums of affliction, or less salutary methods borne of vexation.

For a few years now, I have been introducing historical and literary materials

about madness into my undergraduate classes in medical anthropology and history. While Wulf Sachs' *Black Hamlet* is a splendid source from which I learn each time I reread it with students, this year I have assigned Wole Soyinka's *Madmen and Specialists* to a wonderfully engaged group of UF students. The complex metaphorical plot of this play, set and written at the time of the Biafran civil war, takes place in the surgical clinic of a doctor who did unsavory things as an army intelligence officer and finds himself guarding his "mad," cannibal-like father from four eccentric beggar-cripples wounded at war. Two earth mothers with a store of medicinal herbs also suggest the vernacular. In many ways, Papa Mfumu'eto's many comic zines also have helped me in understanding idioms of madness in Africa: his text-image idioms are often closer to folly though the folly can go toxic and harmful, producing outlandish bodily distortions. While they speak to rustic-turned-urbane religious imaginations active in the Lower Congo region since at least the 18th century, they are helping me envisage the kinds of vernacular counterparts I will need to make my wider history of congruent and incongruent notions and spaces work.

Nancy Rose Hunt is professor of history.

