

**A Nation of Maniacs:
Understanding Commodified Mania Through Bipolar Narratives**
Alexandra Marino

Excerpt

“How could one, should one, recapture that intensity...the glorious moods of dancing all night and into the morning, the gliding through starfields and dancing along the rings of Saturn, the zany manic enthusiasms? How can one ever bring back the long summer days of passion, the remembrance of lilacs, ecstasy, and gin fizzes that spilled down over a garden wall, and the peals of riotous laughter that lasted until the sun came up or the police arrived?”

— Jamison, 211

This quote epitomizes the conflicted feelings Dr. Kay Redfield Jamison has towards her exhilarating and transcendental manic episodes. In her autobiography *An Unquiet Mind: A Memoir of Moods and Madness*, Jamison chronicles her battle with the cyclical highs and lows of bipolar disorder, a disease that for her is simultaneously lethal and life-affirming. Her manic highs are characterized by hypersexuality, fluidity of ideas, exuberance, extreme confidence, and hyperactivity (128). In contrast, when she cycles into depression after a manic episode, a desolate fog encapsulates her mind, bringing thoughts of suicide (39). Even as a professor of psychiatry who understands firsthand the ramifications of depression, she battles against taking the very same medications she urges her own patients to take. She fears that these mood stabilizers would eradicate the sweeping majesty of her mania, as depicted above (92). After years of resisting consistent treatment, she finally decides to stay on her medication, realizing that a life with less dramatic fluctuations in moods is preferable over no life at all. Her purpose in writing such an explicit account of her illness is to help others struggling with the same disease (xi). Yet Jamison’s dramatic lyricism depicting her mania in the above description is performative, purported for effect and dramatic flair rather than authenticity, which is in conflict with the memoir’s purpose of advocacy. From this quote and other passages in the memoir, mania is portrayed as an effervescent and covetable state, rather than a symptom of a

very serious illness. This book is part of a trend of popular narratives that portray manic episodes as a desirable commodity to those who are not bipolar. Performativity in bipolar narratives like *An Unquiet Mind* offers an opportunity to explore the societal phenomenon of romanticized mania.

Sociologist Arthur W. Frank explains that society considers the telling of illness narratives to be a virtue in and of itself, that there is something noble and admirable in these narratives because of their subject matters (Frank 137). This belief is demonstrated in the positive response to the publication of *An Unquiet Mind*. In a review of this memoir, *The New York Times* made a statement that lauded a group of illness narratives, including *An Unquiet Mind*, stating that, “we can be grateful that these authors have risked telling their stories” (O’Brien). National Public Radio proclaimed her as “fearless” (Moezzi). Frank and these reviewers show that there is a belief that such narratives are heroic and completely authentic. Yet this admiration for illness narratives lies in the mere telling of the stories, not in the manner in which they are told.

However, the manner is quite important because illness autobiographies are inherently performative, complicating the belief that these narratives are authentic. These narratives are performative because they are an opportunity for the authors to retell their stories, a means of redemption from the stigma cast over their identities on account of their illnesses (Frank 135). Sociologist Erving Goffman writes that this illness stigma “spoils” the identity (7). In order to redeem one’s spoiled identity, the author must create a different self and a different “system of honor” in which that self is accepted through their autobiographies (Frank 137). Therefore, their autobiographies are performative because they are stepping outside of their own truth in telling their stories (Frank 138). However, for bipolar narratives in particular, they are not only popular because they are perceived to be authentic or are a means of redemption from stigma, but because there are other forces at work. Rather, the societal context of postmodern capitalism is a key player in the popularization of bipolar narratives and should be explored further.

Sociologist Kurt Borchard defines a main characteristic of the postmodern era as the reign of capitalism over society, demonstrated by corporations commodifying once- subversive cultural narratives (250). In the past, only objects or services could be commodified, yet now under postmodernism intangible things like narratives are becoming commodities (Borchard 247). The narratives commodified are subversive, a threat to the status quo, so corporations reappropriate, a method of redefinition, the narrative's meaning into something socially acceptable, thereby neutralizing the threat (Borchard 252). Borchard illustrates this concept of commodification with the neutralization of the anticapitalism message of the iconic punk rock group the Sex Pistols. Capitalists reappropriated the punk rock movement by selling punk styled clothing in stores, printing the images of Sex Pistols on different goods such as t-shirts, lunch boxes, and even slot machines (Borchard 252). Their narrative of nonconformity to the capitalist system was no longer subversive but rather became culturally available to everyone through the objects that bore the band's image or mimicked the punk style of clothing (Borchard 252). Anyone who could buy a Sex Pistols t-shirt could claim a part in a rebellious narrative like Sid Vicious. As a result, under postmodernism, the punk rock movement became a commodity and in its reappropriation lost its subversive nature.

Works Cited

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Author Commentary

Alexandra Marino

In my writing seminar, “Autobiography and Identity,” the final assignment was to examine the cultural implications and landscapes of an autobiography. I chose Kay Redfield Jamison’s autobiography *An Unquiet Mind*, by far the most famous memoir tackling the subject of bipolar disorder. Through my analysis, I was able to follow the guidelines of the assignment while also following my own interest. I was able to use *An Unquiet Mind* as a springboard for writing about something that fascinated me: how mania, the cyclical highs of bipolar disorder, have become a romanticized cultural narrative. The first few pages were the most difficult because I had to analyze sources that could not have been more different from each other, such as primary sources of memoir and sociological texts. I had to deftly transition from discussing the performativity of Jamison’s description of her mania to the commodification of subversive narratives. By layering my sources, I developed the argument that bipolar disorder, specifically mania, was once a shameful identity but has now become romanticized and popular. I tread carefully when demonstrating that bipolar disorder is popular both culturally and diagnostically. I had to weave in scientific sources to demonstrate how the diagnostic criteria of bipolar disorder has expanded, making this disorder applicable to more people. The reasons behind the popularization of the diagnosis of bipolar disorder called for a nuanced analysis of a variety of sources. While the pharmaceutical industry does profit from an increase in the diagnosis of bipolar disorder, it is also a costly public health issue because of the high rate of disability and suicide.

Editor Commentary

Marty Page

Tackling a subject both medical and theoretical, Alexandra Marino’s *A Nation of Maniacs* artfully explores concepts of both performativity and commodification in mental illness narratives. The opening few paragraphs start by introducing us to one of the paper’s central texts, Dr. Kay Redfield Jamison’s *An Unquiet Mind*, and Alexandra uses that text to segue into an explanation of performativity in the context of illness narratives. Aware that explaining key terms is a subset of orienting, Alexandra goes on to explain what it means that Jamison’s work is performative, “purported for effect and dramatic flair rather than authenticity.” But the orienting to this key concept does not stop there; she spends the third paragraph exploring performativity in the context of illness narratives drawing on sociological literature.

But the explanation does not stop at a full exploration of performativity’s meaning. Next, the paper dives into a paragraph-long definition of postmodernism’s defining trait, commodification, by drawing on Kurt Borchard, another sociologist. By doing this, Alexandra manages to construct a theoretical lens for examining a number of primary sources. The cohesion of the writing and the smoothness of the transitions between complicated concepts make a difficult subject easy to read.

The beauty of Alexandra’s writing comes in its ability to not just define key terms but to probe and problematize their meaning by drawing on excellent secondary literature. This is

particularly important in papers that deal with multiple primary texts using a theoretical lens. As Alexandra discusses in her commentary, this was not an easy task. But her ability to go beyond basic definitions to examine key academic terms in the context of the topic of illness narratives makes this paper a model for strong orienting and key terms definition.