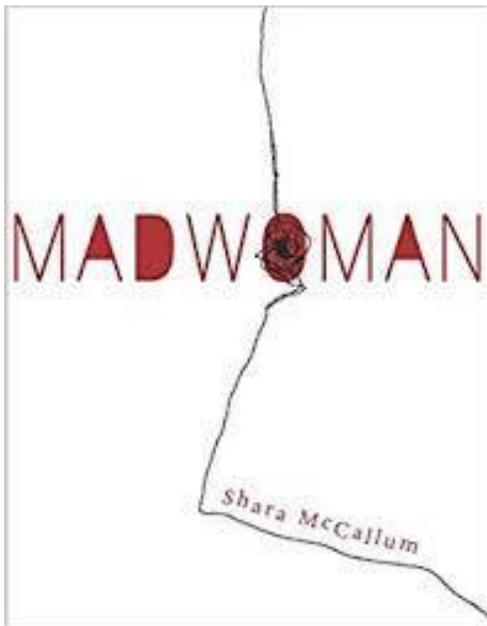


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MADWOMAN: A FORUM ON SHARA MCCALLUM'S POETICS

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SHARA MCCALLUM'S *MADWOMAN* AND OTHER MADWOMEN

By Michela A. Calderaro

The madwoman is “everywhere, so nowhere; /in plain sight [she walks] through walls” (“Race”, p. 17).

Her body is masked with “multiple skins” – a smooth skin, or scales, a flesh that is white or black. She looks like no one else, and she can belong to no person and no place. She is the “whore of Babylon,” and she is the kin sister of Lot’s wife [of Sodom and Gomorrah]. She walks alone, has no companions with whom to share her tragedy. She will always long for something that cannot be, seeking to become something that she cannot be, hoping for a life that she cannot even fathom, but knows exists.

The figure of the madwoman has always been a conspicuous presence in Shara McCallum’s writings, ever since her first collection of poems. This figure is a ghost, sometimes visible, sometimes just a vaguely perceived presence.

She is “the howling night,” a haunting nightmare. She can take on different forms: she is a mother, a daughter who can morph into a fish, a mermaid, a snake, a bird. She is a life bearer who suddenly turns into a bearer of destruction and a maker of havoc.

She is a being that cannot belong and is therefore condemned to wander through land, sky, and sea in an endless quest. She is the daughter of Destiny, the progeny of the collective memory of Europe, Africa, and the New World.

McCallum’s madwoman is always on the verge of a precipice. Exile is her status, lingering on a “doorstep forever” is her fate. She is the challenger of the patriarchal order, and as such she walks surrounded by beauty, danger, and impending violence along a path marked by *memory*—often an “unbearable memory.”

Here, as in McCallum’s previous works, poems are brimming with cross-cultural, historical, popular, and literary references. Poems communicate across the collection, reaching out to her earlier books.

Moreover, as with her other collections, we are led into the maze of *Madwoman* by an epigraph. This time the lines that precede the poems are by Lisel Mueller: “Memory is the only afterlife I understand...” Mueller’s words, her whole oeuvre actually, reflect Shara McCallum’s own interest in the mechanics of memory, in how memory works in order to create or re-create images of ourselves, how the life we present to the public would often clash with our own private, inner self.

The fate of the madwoman is forever linked to the fate of the mermaid, who loses herself trying to understand who she really is.

Madwomen, as far back as we can remember, have always been locked up in the attic. Often, madwomen were wives or daughters who had defied the patriarchal order, wives or daughters of different skin colors or, simply *different* from what society was expecting them to be.

We find in McCallum’s works yet another defining trait of the madwoman: a geographical dichotomy between natural spaces—such as islands and water—where she can breathe and cultural spaces, either mental or physical, where she is kept confined.

And this leads to another larger dichotomy, between past and present. Indeed, in Shara McCallum’s new collection, time and space become closely inter-connected because the memory of outer space, which is also the memory of a time lived in the past, clashes with the claustrophobic spaces of the present. Thus, time and space define who the madwoman really is.

Mermaids, time and space, both present and past, both physical and mental, and geography and history all come together in one of the most lyrical and symbolic poems of the collection, rightly titled “Madwoman’s geography,” where we witness an astonishing and revelatory transformation.

The poem, short and seemingly less ‘impressive’ than others, actually epitomizes one of the main accomplishments of McCallum’s gift as a writer: her capacity to create a complex poetic structure, built with a multitude of levels, that combines folk tales and myths, drawn from both the European and the Afro-Caribbean tradition, including literary citations, Christian and Greek beliefs, and mythological references. Water spirits have been a constant presence in men’s lives. Each civilization has created its

own version of water spirits, calling them sirens, giving them tails or wings, calling them snake-women, or bird-women, worshiping them as goddesses.[\[1\]](#)

The belief in the supreme mother water goddess is closely linked to the connected notions of the cycle of birth, death, rebirth, and the indestructible soul/life force, *chi*, eternally moving through time and space. The mother water goddess [...] controls the major transition points, situated in the water, between life and death. Furthermore, the idea of the watery transitions between life, death, and rebirth [is] tied to a circular concept of time and eternity.[\[2\]](#)

The transformation of the speaking ‘I’ in the poem follows the transformation of the mythological water goddess from the snake-woman, covered with scales, to the bird-woman, flying up in the sky, to a water being, a mermaid, a siren, who, also covered in scales, follows the wake left behind by ships in order to chart her course, in a timeless circular movement, an evolutionary process leading to eternity.

Such an evolutionary process cannot but echo W. B. Yates’s “Sailing to Byzantium.” There too, we find a similar triad, “fish, flesh or fowl,” and there too the triad becomes dynamic if considered as a scansion of an evolutionary process—that is, if we move it on a temporal and spatial dimension. From the sea, as a fish, comes the man/flesh, who will soar, as a fowl—both intellectually and artistically.

The form of symbolism reached by McCallum is similar to Yates’s. As in Yates, her conception of the universe is both mystical and visionary, based on images which become symbols, of beliefs and folklore which allow her to create her own order of things, her own cosmic system. And here too the speaking ‘I’ becomes the symbol of the Artist.

Once again, almost without perceivable efforts, McCallum combines experiences and influences from the many cultures that make her one of the most challenging voices in contemporary literature.

Using and reinventing language, McCallum unveils the self that, through appearing through metaphors and images, has been hidden from public view. Then she leads us towards unknown and scary territories, to the final realization that the *madwoman* is what we see when we wander “the hall of mirrors” and look deep enough into the broken mirror of life.



[\[1\]](#) Sirens are said to have been snake-women, or to have been given wings by Demeter, who was hoping their songs would help find her daughter Persephone. They were the bird-women who would accompany the dead to the Underworld, and who later lost their wings when challenging the Muses, Zeus’s daughters, for the best song.

[\[2\]](#) Sabine Jell-Bahlsen, *The Water Goddess in Igbo Cosmology*, Trenton and Asmara: Africa World Press, 2008, p. 196.

Shara McCallum, *Madwoman*, (2017) Peepal Tree Press (UK) and Alice James Books (USA).