



Mad Matters: A Critical Reader in Canadian Mad Studies

Edited by Brenda A. LeFrançois, Robert Menzies and Geoffrey Reaume

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Book review by Jasna Russo

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The task of reviewing this book feels like a great privilege, but also an impossible mission. Reading through its many chapters is like embarking on exciting journeys in multiple directions, and one wonders whether such a rich, long and inspiring trip can be appraised at all. Each chapter opens up a different topic and invites further thinking and exploration.

Though modestly confining itself to *Canadian Mad Studies*, this is, as far as I am aware, the first publication worldwide to introduce the field of Mad Studies. Since Canada is the only country on earth offering a university course in Mad people's history, the origins of *Mad Matters* may come as no surprise. However, this 'critical reader' is in no way a guide to some hip, dry, new academic discipline. In the excellent glossary of terms at its end, Mad Studies is characterised, among other things, as a field "informed by and generated by the perspectives of psychiatric survivors and Mad-identified researchers and academics" (p. 337). Thus, it is not only the volume and depth of this unique corpus that complicates any attempt to review it. What is probably most challenging is the very nature of its subject: madness is hard to define and describe. Fortunately, it also resists harnessing and management.

The three editors seem aware of this when they remind us at the outset that "the full story of Mad Studies has yet to be acted out, much less written down" (p. 11). Their attempt to organise this book into five main sections looks good and makes sense superficially, but it doesn't really work. The 23 terrific chapters plus the introduction, foreword and glossary each stand for themselves and have a life of their own. It is my firm opinion (and experience) that they can be read in any order. This weighty book serves to connect them gently and let them shine. It brings the contributions together and makes their shared values and principles visible without yoking them into any dogmatic interpretative framework. This is what makes the editing work very special. I confess to first skipping over the editors' prefatory texts for each section because I did not really want to be introduced to the contributions in any way. On coming back to these introductions, however, I found that they sum up the main points well and accurately. Revisiting these bridging parts helps to navigate through the considerable material and keep track of what you have read.

The authors seem to have a mix of backgrounds, and some have personal experiences of psychiatric treatment. Instead of wasting words on criticising the famous 'us and them' attitude, the writing and editing of this book dismantles this division on every page. This is at first hard to endure, and it confused an old-fashioned survivor like me. I caught myself trying to figure out who was who and

turning to the authors' bios to check: are they certified mad or not? This is the first publication that managed to make me give up this kind of inspection at some point; it took me beyond the little, big dichotomies that my world is made of. Even if this was momentary, it was exceptional. When the editors write that "to study madness is to probe the very foundations of our claims to being human" (p.21), you simply trust them, and this trust is built by the time you reach the book's end if not before.

I started with the topics and authors that interested me most and gravitated towards those less known or completely new to me. In hindsight, I can say that there was no chapter that I began and then postponed, which made for a fine balance in such a massive work. If this small review is to stay true to this experience, I must either mention everyone or no one at all. I have chosen the first option despite knowing that it will drastically reduce all I have to say about each chapter to just a single remark, and maybe not even the most important one. Still, I wish to thank:

David Reville for wisely reminding us that having found their way into academy, Mad Studies must find their way back into the community;

Kathrin Church for being brutally honest about the structural inequities that separate 'regular' academics' career trajectories from those of 'Mad' scholars;

Irit Shimrat for exposing 'community psychiatric services' for what they are and distinguishing them powerfully from *real community* and *real help*;

Bonnie Burstow for calling on us to take responsibility for beyond the here-and-now and consider what type of world our language helps to create;

Lanny Beckmann and Megan Davies for sharing the way they met and worked together and for highlighting the importance of owning life histories;

Erick Fabris for all his thoughts and feelings about peer work and for discussing actual options to "interrupt the interveners";

Jennifer Poole and Jennifer Ward for distinguishing *good* grief from *mad* grief and finding courage, respect and love for the latter;

Maria Liegghio for naming the denial of survivor knowledge as epistemic violence and for understanding writing as an act of social justice;

Rachel Gorman for depicting the dangers and pitfalls of identity politics, including the realm of Mad identity and for turning my world upside down;

Louise Tam for her close scrutiny of the Mad movement in relation to race and colonialism and for explaining the concept of *conviviality*;

Lilith "Chava" Finkler for her excellent analysis of how the Canadian law on land use basically extends the function of asylums into the community and for introducing survivor housing as a topic for Mad Studies;

Nérée St-Amand and Eugène LeBlanc for connecting the work of three exceptional 19th-century women to the contemporary Mad movement;

Mel Starkman for an overview of the 20th-century Mad movement that he produced back in 1981;

Andrea Daley for contrasting the terms *negotiating* and *managing* in relation to queer (in)visibility in psychiatric settings;

Shaindl Diamond for touching on the sensitive issue of fundamental differences within what she identifies as the psychiatric survivor, the Mad and the antipsychiatry constituency, and for suggesting some ways different political visions can work together;

Don Weitz for all that he has done and continues to do towards banning electroshock treatment;

Ji-Eun Lee for her analysis of five survivor narratives and for celebrating anger in our stories;

Rob Wipond for sharing his extensive knowledge of how news media work as well as sage advice on how to subvert their messages;

Jijian Voronka for her much needed analysis of the mechanisms for “rerouting of ‘troubled youth’ from criminal justice system to mental health system” and their consequences;

Lucy Costa for showing how Mad activists can take part in court procedures as *intervenors* and for discussing the implications of our involvement in legal processes;

Gordon Warne for his simple but brilliant suggestions about how to keep exposing and challenging psychiatric assessments and confinement;

Marina Morrow for an outstanding examination of the intimate link between the concept of recovery, neoliberalism and the “healthification of social problems”, as well as her call to “recover recovery”;

Kimberly White and Ryan Pike for taking mental health literacy programmes apart and revealing how professional knowledge is being marketed and how it becomes *official* knowledge; and

Peter Beresford for a foreword that does justice to the achievement of this exceptional anthology, recognising it as “a crucial step forward through its identification of Mad Studies” and a “counter-discourse that is desperately needed in our times”.

This is where my list finishes, but what is best about this collection is that it doesn’t really end: the ideas stay with you as a reader, calling forth your own, so that you too may find yourself becoming part of the “story of Mad Studies”. A note of caution, then: this text could be contagious if you happen to be susceptible.