



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Speculative Syllabi: Imagining Pedagogies of Madness and Hope

Sarah Cavar¹, Helen Rottier²

¹University of Maine, Augusta, ²University of Illinois, Chicago,

Abstract

What can a syllabus do? In this piece, we will discuss the theoretical and practical implications of what we are calling the “Mad Speculative Syllabus,” a document designed to prefigure collective educational transformation via Mad pedagogical praxis. First, we will consider the syllabus as an imaginative document – one which, intentionally or otherwise, delimits the boundaries of student and instructor creativity, yet also one with the capacity to overturn those boundaries. We use an intentionally ungenerous analysis — even a paranoid reading — of the syllabus to acknowledge the saneist politics of the classroom, while emphasizing the need for generous engagement with/in the classroom community. We look to contemporary Mad interventions, including sarah madoka currie’s building beloved community through Mad citational practice; Cavar’s transMad epistemologies, and Ben-Moshe’s dis-epistemologies, as well as moments of speculative and liberatory pedagogy in existing syllabi, including citational practices, access normalization, openness to opacity, and resistance to quantification/traditional modes of grading. We conclude by modeling a speculative document of our own, whose sections readers are invited to wrestle with and retool to their own classroom needs.

Keywords

Madness, critical pedagogy, neurodivergence, academia, Sanism, pathologisation

History

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Pre-Text: *Speculative* How?

If I were to begin a course on of speculation

course of, course of antibiotics, of antibodies, of
anti- bodies

I would perhaps begin with its many meanings. Capitalists, whose daily practices are proof positive of the claim that not all madnesses are politically compatible with our own, speculate on the costs of pretend objects with pretend money, getting rich off guessing games whose analogues (guess: is the knock at my door a neighbor, or a SWATman? Is this food, or poison, or something worse?) lock us up?

All of the above are forms of speculation that co-exist uneasily by the groundbreaking historical interventions of creatives like Octavia E. Butler, Ursula K. Le Guin, and Samuel R. Delany, as well as the contemporary practices of Akwaeke Emezi, Larissa Lai, Becky Chambers, and micha cárdenas, all of which dream beyond and against white supremacist, cisheteropatriarchal, ableist/sanist neoliberal capitalism.

I present these two “sides” because they are not sides. Both use the technolog[ies] of speculation, albeit to wildly different ends. We take up these technologies, too, technologies we braid with that of the syllabus, also deployed routinely in service of hegemonic violence against marginalized students. The Mad syllabus could, I speculate, be used toward these ends; at the very least, these ends could very well be produced with a document that claims Madness.

We do not present a firm definition of speculative, speculate, or speculation in this text, except by affiliation with other words. We are against definition, and particularly the existing definition of “speculative,” which is as follows:

1. engaged in, expressing, or based on conjecture rather than knowledge: discussion of the question is largely speculative.
2. (of an investment) involving a high risk of loss: the bonuses cannot be put at risk due to some speculative investment.
 - (of a business venture) undertaken on the chance of success, without a preexisting contract: he was involved in speculative building.

As you enter this text, I encourage you to track our development of “speculation” and its derivatives, particularly as these concepts relate to epistemic in/justice. Join us as, contra definition 1., conjecture is the event/invent/advent of Mad knowledge.

Introduction

The syllabus is a sane and sanist document. It doesn't have to be. We landed on *speculation* in the process of devising a workshop for the 2023 National Women's Studies Association Annual Conference in Baltimore, MD. The conference sub-theme, in honor of the late bell hooks, was "Pedagogies of Resistance and Hope: Teaching to Transgress." Our speculative notions on pedagogy long predated this particular intervention — we are, after all, queer Mad craps, in and of what adrienne maree brown (2019) identified as the "science fiction" of everyday organizing. But having taught and served as a teaching assistant for several years, primarily in introductory-level courses in the humanities and social sciences, crystallized the urgency of new ways of working with students and led most immediately to our understanding that we needed this, *now*.

Our sense of urgency was only further confirmed and affirmed at the moment of the workshop itself: after giving a brief presentation to a too-full room, we left attendees with a series of questions:

- What is the affective impact of the speculative syllabus?
- What do you want to communicate with your syllabus?
- What other possibilities and challenges should we discuss?

Responses were simultaneously enthusiastic and hesitant, the latter, primarily, due to concerns about implementation. Depending on an instructor's status in the sometimes-opaque hierarchy of their particular institution, abilities to move, as some put it, "beyond" the realm of speculation and into the "concrete," is, at best, severely limited — at least on paper. This, combined with very genuine worry about the effects of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic; insufficient support to students or instructors, particularly precariously employed teaching assistants and adjuncts; and an escalation in long-present conditions of genocide, ecocide, forced poverty, and/as rising global fascisms on collective well-being, is of utmost concern. We cannot speculate while disavowing the present.

For this reason, we are interested in practical speculation. Not practical, as opposed to impractical, but practical, as in, willing to be practiced. To get friendly with speculation as a form of (trans)Mad inquiry, undoing the methodological, social, and epistemological norms governing and (over)determining cis-sane life (Cavar, 2022). We formulate syllabi to ask a question and answer it: what (are / we) doing here, particularly as the coercive demands of the job market structure our course documents and attempt to foreclose alternatives. It is necessary for Madpeople working in/against/adjacent to any institutions (including the University) to ask this question constantly, repeatedly, with paranoia and skepticism and perseverance.

Traditionally, educational efforts both ad hoc and institutionally governed have taken for granted a shared pursuit of objective truth, accompanied by a demand for transparency from students not reciprocated by administration. These “truths” affirm classed, racialized, ableist, cisheteropatriarchal norms not verbalized, but ever present in the so-called “hidden curriculum” underlying institutional discourse (Giroux & Penna, 1979; Rossouw & Frick, 2023). Here, education is a process by which an instructor or other resource renders transparent the correct set of beliefs to their pupil, an ongoing dialectic in which clarity is attained gradually and through negotiation, and/or an existential journey whose aim is not only to share a series of ideas or facts with a student but to foster ongoing relationships which are themselves pedagogical.

All of these methods have their place and utility, from the first, which functions akin to what certain activist spaces might call “sitting down and shutting up,” to the last, which overlaps meaningfully with what Johnson and McRuer (2014) call “cripistemologies.” Notable for their orientation away from the hierarchical modes of knowledge production (in which clarity is inevitably a “higher” intellectual achievement and purview of the professoriate, and which the student must strive to reach through grit and deference), Johnson and McRuer offer group chats, text chains, and, broadly, knowledges produced outside the R1 university. Likewise, currie (2022) describes classroom and syllabus design as a practice of “beloved community”-making, whose centrality was built not only into quotidian classroom practice but also assessment.

In this text, we offer a constellation of strategies for instructors interested in Maddening the syllabus, in which *Madden[ing]* refers to the destabilization of social, epistemological, and methodological norms — in this case specifically, disrupting the written and unwritten rules of classroom engagement. We are not making an argument (nor, as discussed in the Pre-Text, writing a [re]definition), nor do we presume the universal applicability of the particular constellation of techniques we offer. Rather, we mean to open a conversation in which we can imagine, together, how to do instruction differently, or, how to think “teaching” beyond the prescriptive language of “instruction” itself.

In this work, we demand such confrontation with/in the university. We present the syllabus as an imaginative document, rather than a prescriptive one, asking questions of this genre of writing rooted in our training in queer(/)crip(/)trans(/)Mad(/)feminist modes of inquiry. We would also like to document our own present relationships with the university:

Both of us, at the time that this article was written, were graduate students, though we have both since received our PhDs.

Cavar is a white Jewish writer with a PhD in Cultural Studies, living, teaching, and studying on Patwin land (the university of california: davis). They are a queercrip&transMad psychiatric survivor. They are also a remote adjunct instructor of Interdisciplinary Studies at the university of maine: augusta, which is located on the

land of the Penobscot and connected to the other Wabanaki Tribal Nations: the Passamaquoddy, Maliseet, and Mi'kmaq.

Helen Rottier is a white, queer, mad scholar-practitioner and psychiatric survivor. She is the Program Coordinator of the Disability Cultural Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, located on ancestral Ho-Chunk land known as Teejop, where she lives with her partner. She holds a PhD in Disability Studies from the University of Illinois Chicago, located on the land of many native nations including the Three Fires Confederacy: Potawatomi, Odawa, and Ojibwe Nations.

We write here as a dialogue — with each other and with you. We write here, prefiguratively, inasmuch as this document can itself be considered a speculative syllabus, a jubilant conversation between ourselves, our interlocutors, and you as reader/scholar/speculator. We propose the speculative syllabus as a critical step towards Mad liberation in/beyond the university: simultaneously a rejection of sane syllabi and saneist policies and the vital process of crafting the documents that create the classroom/university/world we long for, now and in the future.

Syllabi That Suck

In elementary school, students often receive “contracts” from teachers at the beginning of the academic year. Meant to encourage — this is to say, manage — students to behave in compliant ways via a mimicry of collaboration, our own documents looked something like this template, pulled from the John S. Armstrong Elementary School (in Dallas, TX) website:

Class Contract

In order to be a contributing member of _____ classroom community, I promise to display respect, kindness, and compassion by doing the following:

Doing my personal best in completing tasks

Actively listening

Following [school]’s Code of Conduct

Working productively with others

Respecting myself, others, and others’ property

Being responsible for my actions and choices

Taking ownership of my learning by maintaining good work habits

(John. S. Armstrong Elementary School, n.d.)

While we won't linger too long on this particular contract, there are several notable elements in the above text: the use of language meant to prioritize productive output ("contributing member," "doing my personal best in completing tasks," "working productively with others," "taking ownership of my learning by maintaining good work habits") perhaps clearest among them. Most importantly, not only does this document assume and reify productivity and prosociality as equivalent to "good" — Helen recalls a song from her elementary school code of conduct with lyrics, "I will be kind because it makes me feel good," — but offers to students a mimicry of consent.

The above elementary school contract — to say nothing of the contracts required in some psychotherapeutic groups — are not exact copies of the undergraduate syllabus, though they do rhyme. The contractual elements of classroom syllabi mirror demands for productivity, self-ownership, and nebulous concepts of "respect" for self, others, and property, while extending the illusion of consent by invoking rational *adulthood*. The undergraduate syllabus — and, indeed, the undergraduate classroom — are discursively delineated from their K-12 counterparts via a heightened emphasis on student personal responsibility and independence.

At the same time, and perhaps even more insidiously, classroom norms both written and assumed obfuscate the epistemic and social hierarchies embedded in academic institutions, grounded, we argue, in a presupposition of rational "saneness" as constituent to the student body(mind). The syllabus as prescriptive or contractual has faced critique by educators and pedagogues, especially in the recent past. Heidebrink-Bruno (2019) explained,

Today's syllabi presuppose students are a certain way. A standard syllabus lists a number of policies, grading information, and learning objectives the student ought to accomplish during the course. Such a syllabus suggests that students should fulfill some predetermined role where one must fit the mold of the syllabus to succeed, or deviate from it and suffer the consequences.

Here, Heidebrink-Bruno condemns the syllabus as "a small cage" beyond the confines of which students cannot learn, experiment, or grow. The presupposition of the student present in the post-secondary education classroom is rooted in all of the biases that have shaped academia throughout history - successful students, for whom the classroom is suited and situated, are white, wealthy, cis, male, nondisabled, and sane. Yet even this presupposed student is limited in what they can learn and achieve when the syllabus outlines every expectation. To defy these expectations is perceived as a threat, and one heightened by a student's minoritized status as racialized, queer/trans, disabled, or Mad.

Minoritized students are violently present(ed) in the syllabus, despite being erased and neglected from the classroom. Many universities require sections on disability accommodations, and some require information about diversity, always implied and implicated towards students of color, and name/pronouns in use, always implied and

implicated towards queer and trans students. While these efforts typically begin with well-meaning and even radical pedagogues incorporating inclusive practices into their classroom and syllabus, the institutionalization and diminishing of concrete practices into boilerplate statements that instructors and students skim/skip over on the first day of class deemphasize practices that could transform the classroom. Wasley (2008) explored the syllabus' shift from naming topics and texts to enumerating classroom rules and university policies. Her conclusion is that instructors should practice "letting go" of the legalistic syllabus and approach students with agency and in the spirit of collaboration. A faculty member who had taken this advice shared regarding students, "We're not on two sides of the contract; we're on the same side," demonstrating the distance that syllabus statements, however well-intentioned, can create between student and instructor.

Take, for example, the access statement ["boilerplate" statement adapted and anonymized from several syllabi]:

Students with documented disabilities may be entitled to classroom accommodations. The student shall provide the instructor with a letter from [Disability Services] recommending the academic accommodations that the instructor is responsible for providing. Students are responsible for requesting accommodation as soon as possible to allow the university reasonable time to evaluate their request and offer reasonable adjustments. Consult with the instructor and [Disability Services] if you have any questions or concerns.

Standard language typically directs students to their campus disability services, wherein they begin (or re-begin, or fail to begin) the arduous process to obtain academic accommodations. Students may be required to provide documentation of a *legible* disability, diagnosed by a medical professional, which is a barrier for many disabled students, especially those marginalized within the medical-industrial complex and those with less access to health care. Students receive little to no education or skill-building, yet accommodations statements emphasize that they are responsible for ensuring their accommodations are provided in the classroom, despite power imbalances and ableist policies and attitudes that are the norm in academia. Even when academia anticipates or acknowledges the disabled student, it is the *sane* disabled student, expected and required to perform sanity within the "sanestitution" (Procknow, 2019).

I, Helen, joke that I had to earn a master's degree focused on academic accommodations before I could secure accommodations for my own education. (My master's thesis focused on accommodations as simultaneously a facilitator and barrier to success as identified by autistic college students.) As an undergraduate student, I knew I qualified for accommodations, but struggled to navigate the accommodations process, including making a phone call to an unknown, unnamed gatekeeper of "help." I questioned how accommodations, which I had reduced to "extended time on tests" could help me with the barriers I was facing as a Mad

college student. No one ever told me what accommodations could be, and internalized ableism and unnavigable bureaucracy prevented me from learning.

The bureaucracy implied by the so-called “boilerplate” access statement not only confines disability into that which is legible (and “reasonable”) to an office of disability services, a medical professional or team of professionals, and/or the professor-as-gatekeeper, it also segregates the language of “access” from the discourses of risk and danger populating other parts of the syllabus. Mad students — usually euphemized as “students with mental health needs” — are rarely addressed directly in boilerplate access statements, or in the discourse of formal accommodations themselves. Rather, “mental health” resources — occasionally outside suicide/crisis lines, more often simply the phone number or web address of student counselling services — are listed separately, to be accessed in times of exception, of crisis. Other accommodation practices (extension and absence policies being notable examples) typically exist separately from statements regarding accessibility, despite the ubiquity of extended deadlines and relaxed absence policies as University-granted accommodations to individual students. Likewise, issues described as “mental health”-based are most often outsourced, as illustrated by this composite statement:

To access mental health services, call [Student Counseling Center]; in case of an emergency, please call 9-8-8.

There are several reasons for this “mental health” statement to be listed separately from the boilerplate access statement. The first is the semantic gap which remains between disability and “mental illness.” Another is the legal implications and mandated reporting requirements associated with students in crisis, which renders, as we discuss later on, the instruction of Mad students a form of “risk management.” The last, and most highly telling, reason is the imagined root of a student’s personal crisis: a mental health section appended to a syllabus is not, in the writer’s mind, geared toward a student with ongoing psychosocial disability or distress, but rather to the student pushed to a state of crisis by the demands of the University. The student who may be what might be called “durationally Mad” (Mad in ways not solely explicable by acute crisis related to the university) is nowhere in sight; imagined not to reach the University at all. Nor is the possibility of care and reimagination they and their comrades may offer.

Forms & Methods

There are efforts to rehabilitate the syllabus, ranging from the bland reform to the almost-radical. The COVID-19 pandemic, “racial reckoning” and protests of Summer 2020 and impacts of both on college education in the United States resulted in various calls to retool the syllabus (Alam et al., 2022; Gottlieb, 2020; Sadat Ahadi & Guerrero, 2020). We suspect similar calls will be made in response and reaction to the campus protest encampments of Spring 2024. Occasionally, these calls included “steps for radical inclusivity” (see Gelles, 2020)

consisting of practices that barely scratch the surface of undoing an inherently racist, ableist, and saneist academy.

The objective of the speculative syllabus is not to replicate or rehabilitate the syllabus where it fails, but to uplift what a syllabus can do to advance collective liberation and justice. The Mad speculative syllabus attempts this with special attention to Mad students and scholars within and beyond the academy. The presupposition of [ideal] students as always and already “sane” is entrenched in our understanding of education and knowledge as systems that build upon logic, reason, reality, and empiricism (Price 2011:30). Little space has been made, even in fields like disability studies, to know otherwise, to know madly. Indeed, the language of “reason” attributed to legible accommodations exists in direct opposition to Mad epistemologies, as Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha (2019) writes:

The ADA says that places of employment are required to make “all reasonable accommodations.”

When you’re mad, you are not reasonable.

Your brain is the opposite of reason.

So who accommodates us?

Reason itself is, of course, never unmarked. The forms and methods we privilege in education are bound up in white supremacy culture (Okun, 2021), especially the worship of the written word and prescriptivism, objectivity, and expertise; white supremacy culture is a key informant on who is mad and who is not, and indeed, which forms of Madness are benignly hysterical and which are a threat to the very architecture of Reason itself (Bruce, 2023). Within university discourse, educational institutions are sole providers of so-called “higher learning,” that is to say, invitation into an archive of reason and legibility. Its Others — insane, racialized, “foreign”, gender/bodymind-noncompliant — face both material barriers to entry and simultaneous demands of assimilation and concerted rejection within the classroom.

Such demands for the reasonable and the legible do not begin or end at students, either, as the academy fashions itself “space where only ‘sane’ minds think, create, learn and teach” (Wolframe 2013). A mixture of surveillance (particularly if we are “out” as psychiatrized) and abandonment creates an architecture of inaccess for disabled and Mad instructors, particularly adjuncts and graduate students, but also to those temporally bound by the tenure clock (Price, 2011:108). The presumption that ABD/PhD status is one exclusively reserved for the “sane,” after all, creates a cycle of self-reinforcement: what little support is offered to Mad undergraduates is unavailable to Mad instructors but through what Smilges (2023) calls access thievery, the unauthorized reseizure of time and spoons from sane, abled productivity expectations. Institutional forces like schools, prisons, and sites of psychiatric incarceration

have long colluded to keep “unreasonable” (Mad, angry, radical) perspectives out of instructional positions, a practice made only more stark by the recent dismissals, arrests, and police abuse against instructors for protesting the Palestinian genocide (Alqaisiya & Perugini 2024; Fúnez-Flores 2024; Glover, Ash and Ortega 2024).

The language of rationality and reasonability are organized against all manner of Maddened knowledge production and collective practice, and those who teach it: resistance to the prison, the ward, the university, and empire are collected under the auspices of insanity — and, frequently, paranoia — leaving Mad instructors precarious and punished, and Mad students without vital mentors. But what if Mad and Maddened presences were neither mere opportunities for assimilation nor threats to order, but instead recognized as invitations to other ways of learning, thinking, being? What can Madness teach us, and how can a Mad approach to the syllabus transform the classroom?

The main principle I, Cavar, would like to draw out here is that Mad life is always and already pedagogical, always and already political. This is not only because all persons are, in one way or another, political actors, but also because few identify explicitly as Mad (or, for that matter, *crip*) by accident. The Madness we discuss here is the Madness of Mad Studies, Mad Pride: a Madness that knows itself — or, at the very least, knows the architecture of all it does not know. We live and form intimacies with/in simultaneous and contradictory realities, and reach relationally into lives we may not fully comprehend. Pedagogies of care, love, and collective solidarity — including what Stacey Milburn describes as “*crip doulaing*,” (Piepzn-Samarasinha, 2018) learn us into Mad/*crip* subjectivity and community, from spaces of deliberately depoliticized “mental illness” or “person with a disability” status.

Within this process, we must get comfortable with the opaque, the messy, and the not/never-known, a *transMad* (Cavar, 2022) and *dis-epistemological* (Ben-Moshe, 2018) practice. Paradoxically, this is in fact a challenge to disability and particularly Mad studies on an ontological level, pointing to the precarity many of us feel in an increasingly corporatized university system (and a further reminder that some of the most important work in our field(s) will inevitably occur far outside its purview). Yet, opacity lingers, gumming up both traditional approaches to “accessibility” with texts defying linear clarity and certainly any semblance of “plain” language, and in so doing, challenges university expectations for clear benchmarks of non/-mastery. I aim to assign texts that are impossible to master, texts oriented toward a “speculative university” (Davids et al 2021). I come to my students not only in shared studenthood, but also in shared refusal (Mikulan & Zembylas, 2024) to “know” completely, perfectly, and infallibly. The object of this learning is not mastery, but to engage in a relational process among colleagues and authors, to enter into a dialogue.

Methodologically, celebrating the opaque can be fairly simple: Cavar offers constrained free-writes (writing times of 5-10 minutes in which some arbitrary restriction — never take your hand off the page, transfigure the words used in a certain passage) to spark student discussion. These may or may not be turned in, but are graded only on completion. It also

means opening oneself to unexpected assignment responses, to generative conflict regarding readings and interpretations. Helen designs courses with choose-your-own-adventure elements wherein students rarely complete the same assignments or encounter the same content, but are always in conversation, drawn to teaching and learning what is electric and electrifying for each student.

We extend agency to each interlocutor: the canonical citation, the co-author, the conversation partner, the student, the instructor, the reader. We discuss this process, with credit to Sarah Madoka Currie's citational process in *beloved community* (2022) more in our video discussion.

In contrast, yet perhaps in parallel, exists a non-linear, or circular, approach to scholarship. This line of inquiry is not novel (see Cavar, 2023; Koppers, 2022; Reaume, 2021; Yergeau, 2010), still innovative. Everything we are taught about academic writing (with reading and writing being lauded as The Way to know, teach, and learn), from as early as elementary school and the five-paragraph essay, defies how my Mad mind circles and meanders. There are essential connections to be formed in each new loop, and the process of looping creates new knowledges. The syllabus is bursting with potential for this kind of creation, which need not stop when the semester is over. If learning is formed and forged from encounters over myriad contexts, a Mad approach to learning might acquaint students with learning in contexts of discomfort, confusion, and novelty.

One other method we offer — both in the reading of what we term “syllabi that suck” and in the readings of literature we offer to ourselves and our students — is that of paranoid reading, obsessive reading, and, broadly, ungenerous reading. In “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think this Introduction is About You,” Eve Sedgwick famously critiques what she calls the “paranoid” reading style of the cultural studies critic, who, in her view, seeks perpetually to critique and tear-down at the expense of generative and indeed “reparative” analysis. Here, readers may be tempted to binarize “paranoia” and “repair,” understanding “paranoid readership” as scholarly social pathology, and accordingly, presenting “reparative” reading as a needed balm for paranoia’s inevitable wounds.

When I, Cavar, encountered this paper in my first year of college, it was presented as foundational. Offered early in the semester during a class on queer and feminist theory, its location on the syllabus designated it not as an object of discussion (or, ironically, critique) but instead something of an academic pocket Constitution: keep it around in case the law(s of scholarly discourse) come for you; keep around in case your peers get feisty. My interest in Mad Studies at that time gave me pause at the word “paranoid,” but it was returning to the text early in my doctoral studies that crystalized my objection: it was not only the colloquial dismissal of “paranoia” as way of reading, but also the way such language contributed to categorical delegitimization of paranoid experience, orientation, and practice, that stopped me in my tracks. While numerous other critiques and corollaries have been offered to this

piece since its initial publication, I am less interested in the content of Sedgwick's piece itself and more to its circulation and adoption in sites of academic knowledge production from a Mad pedagogical perspective.

Sedgwick rightly cautions against a practice of academic critique for its own sake, or for the sake of winning an argument over an imagined enemy interlocutor. Rather, she gestures toward collective theorization as a loving practice, and the classroom a place of play, a fresh approach which has facilitated decades of queer academic community (Love, 2010). Within this understanding of collective learning, the paranoid reader is not, per se, an individual (much less an individual with a particular diagnosis), but a force interrupting vital scholarly cooperation, even reifying the very social hierarchies that place us — as queer scholars, trans scholars, disabled and Mad scholars — outside the realm of epistemic viability. Yet, what is the function of “paranoia” in this instance, and whose styles of knowledge production does such shorthand indicate? And what can rejection of paranoia — regardless of the register in which it is used — tell us about Mad thought in scholarly spaces?

Consider the paranoid student. Consider the obsessive and obsessively-scrupulous student. Consider the frustrated and frustrating student, the student who interrupts collective theorization, acting as an Ahmedian killjoy among self-proclaimed killjoys. I, Cavar, have been this student. I have been the professor facing down this student. Each of us brings the sum total of our life experiences with us into the classroom, Madness included; acknowledgement of this is foundational to what we call a *pedagogy of wholeness* (Rottier, 2022). If reparative readings reject paranoia, cynicism, and intransigence, then it seems, in practice, that Madness constitutes a limit to their functions, and a limit to those they may serve. While not all orientations describable as “paranoia” are equivalent or counterhegemonic — consider, for example, the white supremacist, antisemitic “Great Replacement” theory undergirding increased violence toward immigrants and refugees — the exiling of any manner of paranoia from the good, radical, salubrious classroom reproduces parallel conditions of epistemic injustice to those it seeks to remedy.

While it does not categorically or exclusively outweigh theoretical discourse — and indeed, familiar assertions of “lived experience”'s primacy too often devolve into subjective anecdotes — students' lived experiences are instructive texts carried with them into the classroom. Often being paranoid, being critical is the most careful and care-filled engagement we can offer in a world and academe dominated by oppressive forces — including those which claim radicality — which seek to reify “sane-centrism” as necessary to serious scholarly discourse (Procknow, 2019:9). Madness must also attend, as in Smilges' (2023) conceptualization of *crip negativity*, to the fact that our bad crip feelings need not *do* anything. Bad crip feelings, Madness, and distress are not necessarily teaching moments or knowing moments, and yet at the same time, are not simply exilable from a rarefied classroom environment.

Policing, both in its literal and figurative iterations, is instead the primary tactic deployed against not only students who exhibit Mad/Maddened behavior, but also toward its potentiality: classroom behavior, as discussed at the beginning of this section, is a precondition to participation in the classroom. Students are required to “participate” via, for example, raising their hands in class, contributing verbally to large- and small-group discussion, and/or writing on online classroom forums. Syllabic participation requirements responsabilize students in an effort to stay quiet (but not too, or too threateningly quiet) and also “speak [their] minds” in a manner and tone befitting to University and instructor expectations, whether they be grounded in explicit demands for compliance, for “repair,” or anything in between. Here, “good conduct” (rational, sane, decorous conduct) is directly attached to concepts of safety and productivity, wherein each student is personally, morally responsible for advancing classroom discourse in a prescribed way.

Mad, as in crazy, and mad, as in angry: the figure of the disruptive student, too distresses the image of the syllabus as effective regulatory strategy, and of the classroom as isolated, regulatory space. In the context of the “united states,” anxieties over what students “bring in” with them span from firearms to bad moods. This violent and even murderous student — particularly in the long wake of campus shootings — is the specter hanging above syllabi that elide durational Madness (Price, 2011; Reiss, 2010). This, notwithstanding the outsized threat posed not by individual students but by armed campus police units.

The “mental health” section of the syllabus most often contains only information directing students to counseling services and to police/crisis lines; we can understand this choice as policing of its own variety. Not only do the resources presented to students put them at risk (or inevitability) of police contact, they also effectively police the borders of appropriate classroom conduct and access. Professors who cannot *deal with* students in crisis have a means of sending them elsewhere, as well as a shadow-mechanism of mandatory reporting rarely disclosed explicitly. Boundaries between student and instructor as professional and at times adversarial are maintained. And the classroom, as physical and as discursive space, remains “safe” inasmuch as it is free from the specter of Unreason.

To be clear, this structural problem is not one that instructors can or should be expected to resolve alone. In recent years, instructors — especially professors of color, disabled professors, and/or professors of marginalized genders — have faced escalating threats and enactments of violence by armed students as well as non-students; racist, sexist, and ableist harassment; and new entries in a long tradition of inappropriate, abusive comments on teaching evaluations, office hours meetings, and on websites like RateMyProfessor. There is no doubt that these practices are unreasonable — with a small-R — to allow in classroom discourse, especially at their present volume. Yet the reflexive association of oppressive, abusive, and violent behavior with psychiatric disability is on its face a sanist practice, one which the Mental Health Section’s expectations subtly reinforce. Further, this practice of outsourcing does not address the participation of policing, psychiatry, and university administration in upholding practices that enact and enable individualized violence. This is to

say that while professors' syllabi can and do enact sometimes grievous material harm, the harms that these syllabi are capable of enacting emerges in direct correlation with those practiced by systems in-university and beyond.

There is no cure for this. There is no easy fix or perfect balance between the healthy suspicions of students and a dedication to critique that stymies opportunities for genuine collaboration and growth. Indeed, students may push us to understand intransigence as its own form of growth, its own form of collaboration: to be a stick in the mud, to stop-up the pedagogical process, to be chronic and perhaps even terminal complainers, is uncomfortably disarming in the moment, and yet, has its own pedagogical function.

Conclusion & Video: Designing Speculative Syllabi

While creating the workshop that birthed this paper, we thought at length about the relationship between the syllabus and the syllable. Sentences are multisyllabic units — they do not exist in isolation. The Mad syllabus implies, and correctly identifies, the inadequacy of the syllabus that imagines itself in isolation — the syllabus that forecloses new conversations, declares sovereignty over the old, even in attempts at modifying and reckoning with broader social conditions.

The demands placed upon students (as well as their instructors and teaching assistants) constitute not only a normative, ableist, and saneist syllabus, but a *sane* syllabus: not one that simply discriminates against Mad students, but that also upholds and reinforces structures of sanity, abledness, white supremacy, and cisheteropatriarchy as a matter of course. These ideologies extend far beyond the university, and are indeed informed by myriad social and cultural practices: namely, in the case of “sane” syllabi, individualism, productivity, and often-vague ideas of sociality and decorum. Syllabi, regardless of content, reflect and confer a degree of authority (though differently distributed across marginality and privilege) on the writer or instructor presenting it, reaffirming a hierarchy between “assigner” and “assigned” perhaps most clearly visible in the requirement that students *request* accommodations that may either be granted or denied, rather than entering the space assuming that their needs will be met.

Earlier in this text, we brought up the idea of *durational Madness*: a Mad relationality or set of behaviors not simply explicable by the unique pressures of the University, workplace, or other situation of immediate and unusual crisis. Why are classroom syllabi the place many students go to find information about food banks, clothing exchanges, and other shoestring services to cover their basic needs. More importantly, why has the University (the state, the workplace) failed in their duty to provide for them? Why are issues of work, poverty, and illness presumed to be anomalous to student life, such that missing class to attend to them requires special permission? Even when included in good faith, a mere listing of resources or “carve-outs” in attendance or assignment policy do not challenge the conditions these accommodations hope to address, but create an opportunity for their continuation.

While a syllabus with a food bank address or “exceptions” to a strict attendance policy is preferable to the alternative, they strip away the promise of meaningful change and genuine relationships wherein students and instructors recognize one another’s humanity and work towards justice together. When institutionalized, the syllabus statement becomes what Ahmed (2012) describes as substituting policy, committees, and words for action. Inclusion in the syllabus without care and context is violent and violating. Including authors and scholars of color on your syllabus is not radical; omitting these perspectives, or including them through a white-centric lens, is harmful. The harm of inclusion is also evident in the contract framing of the syllabus, as it often asserts that students are entering the classroom autonomously and in an equal position to the instructor. This ignores and erases the pressures exerted upon students within the university and the power dynamics between the instructor/ “grader” and student/ “graded.”

Certainly, the idea that any expression of Madness is solely “acute” is a false one. Yet the idea that sites of pain, crisis, and harm cannot solely be remedied by discrete syllabus changes (to say nothing of individual university accommodations!) allows us to think with another crucial dimension of the speculative syllabus: that this is a document imagining not only new classrooms, but new worlds, for which our pedagogical practices are indeed *practice*.

The speculative syllabus is not a cure to its sane counterparts. It is not just one thing, it is numerous. What undergirds syllabic speculation as a Mad practice is a willingness to undermine the authority assigned to the instructor, the sane interlocutor, and the business-as-usual ideology that education is something disrupted by Madness, rather than enriched and complicated by it. Without adhering to a strict or exclusive definition of who and what constitutes “Mad” or “Maddening,” the Mad syllabus is, we hope, a way of languaging our pedagogical dreams; imagining classrooms and worlds that refuse educational carcerality.

Author bios

Sarah Cavar holds a PhD in Cultural Studies at the UC Davis, where their research interests include critical Mad, disability, and trans studies; the critical digital humanities, and experimental poetry/poetics. They are an instructor of interdisciplinary studies at the University of Maine: Augusta, and the 2025-2026 long-term resident at Sundress Academy for the Arts. Cavar’s work has been published in *Disability Studies Quarterly*, *Kairos*, *The Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies*, and elsewhere. Their dissertation, *transMad, in terms of: An Emblogged Experiment*, examines transMad digital subjectivities and practices of anti-psychiatric language resignification.

Helen Rottier is a scholar-activist engaging with academic ableism, access, and the jagged tensions between academic norms and disabled knowledge production. She has a PhD in Disability Studies from the University of Illinois Chicago. Her research explores dis-

epistemologies and knowledges in and beyond academia. She is interested in disability cultural education, advocacy, and disabled mentoring. She is committed to radically whole pedagogy, emancipatory research methods and critical disability praxis.

Integrity Statement The authors crafted this original manuscript with attention to the knowers most impacted by epistemic violence: we center the knowledge of people with lived experiences of disability and Madness in our conversations on Mad pedagogy. This manuscript was researched, written, and revised by humans, with no AI used in any part of the process.

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