



## BOOK REVIEW

### ***a Mad Turn: anti-methods of Mad studies***

Reviewed by Annelies McEvoy, student, Toronto Metropolitan University, Canada

**Title:** *a Mad Turn: anti-methods of Mad Studies*

**Editor:** phil smith

**Authors:** Jersey Cosantino, Adam W. J. Davies, Rebecca-Eli M. Long, Samuel Z. Shelton, Monica K. Shields, slp, Aubry Threlkeld, j. logan smilges, & Jacquie Pruder St. Antoine

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#### **Abstract**

*a Mad Turn* makes a subversive, evocative, and wonderfully weird contribution to the field of Mad Studies. The collected authors outline a Mad anti-methodology grounded in Mad ways of knowing, being, and doing, while imagining futures and possibilities for Mad scholars. Playful, mischievous writing and formatting styles embody Mad ways of knowing, being, and doing. The book primarily explores Mad identity integration and development. Autoethnographic and poetic narratives explore the unique challenges faced by Mad-identified academics, practitioners, educators, and other people.

#### **Keywords**

Mad Studies, Mad identity, methodology, academia

#### **History**

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*a Mad turn: anti-methods of Mad studies* makes a subversive, evocative, and wonderfully weird contribution to the field of Mad studies. The collected chapters center around a Mad anti-methodology grounded in Mad ways of knowing, being, and doing, while imagining futures and possibilities for Mad scholars. Madness is understood as a force that shapes and unshapes standard approaches, forging and blurring the boundaries of normalcy. Mad ways of doing are shown to use repetition to understand origins, borders, worlds, and selves in increasingly varied ways (slp & Threlkeld, p. 221). The possibilities of Mad approaches are held in tension with “the humiliatingly devastating violence of a sanist world” (Shelton, p. 166). Scholars, students, and educators, whether Mad-identified or not, can gain valuable knowledge and insight from this genre-subverting publication. I will speak to the unique, “maddened” approach the book takes to narrative and formatting, as well as the questions of Mad identity development explored throughout the collected chapters.

The editor, phil smith, embodied Mad ways of knowing with a self-described “disorderly, [...] entangled, anti-linear, crippled, echolalic” (p. 1) writing style that brought dimension and levity to the material. For example, Mad studies is introduced as “undisciplined nonsensical radical subversive political anticolonial recalcitrant antireified critical unsettling cross|inter|transdisciplinary polyphonic resistant counterhegemonic and illogical” (p. 5). This lengthy, almost overwhelming, list of adjectives demonstrates both the broad scope of Mad theory and praxis, and Mad studies’ resistance to any single, concrete definition. Perhaps this won’t resonate with every reader, but it felt congruent with my continuously diverging way of thinking and writing.

Playful, deconstructive departures in language added depth to the critical scholarship which examines:

the psy

spy

sly

crucify

buy

awry

codify

decry

botfly

lie

com

plex

crime(agaiNst humanity)      plex. (p. 3)

I found myself wondering what was happening around him, what was on his mind, and what was in his line of sight while writing these words. Critiques of pathologizing western psychiatric discourses that “po(o)rtrays” (p. 26) Mad bodyminds as disordered are presented in a mischievous, actively defiant tone that epitomizes Mad ways of thinking and doing.

*a Mad Turn* features Mad scholars Jersey Cosantino and Adam Davies of the IMSJ editorial team, as well as Rebecca-Eli Long, Samuel Shelton, Monica Shields, slp and Aubry Threlkeld, j. logan smilges, and Jacquie Pruder St. Antoine. The collected authors found their own balance of making sense and nonsense (Ingram, 2016) while engaging in deeply personal autoethnographic explorations. For example, Shields shares her experience of an “exception to logic” that left her questioning her “lifelong performance of normality” (p. 183). Moments of unexpected levity were brought to existential, deconstructive thinking about the limits of positivist paradigms as readers are guided through her “final and best performance of noir-mal while in the psych hos-pee-tal” (p. 183).

Books that share undiluted Mad lived experiences are rare, and so, so important. People who excel “at meeting [...] diagnostic criteria” (Cosantino, 2024, p. 66) are rarely given language to better understand experiences of dissonance and unease that accompany madness. It is rare to have one’s numbing, dissociating, paranoid, magical thinking, depressive, “unaliving-aspiring” parts acknowledged at all. It is even rarer to have these parts acknowledged in a way that does “not also imply violence, trauma, and fear” (Cosantino, p. 63). Many of us are taught to fear or ignore “moments of rupture and disruption” (Davies, p. 91), learning over time that embodied moments of madness are incompatible with normative definitions of competence, capability, and intelligence. This book reframes such moments as opportunities to “embrace dysregulation, emotional unease, disturbance, and instability” (Davies, p. 105) that we can lean into and learn from.

Shelton recounts their experiences in higher education, and their many interactions with institutionalized sanism, as a Mad-identified student. Rather than accepting the title of “unreliable”, Shelton considers how standard practices, such as the requirement of documentation and diagnosis, create unreliability by making learning environments unwelcoming and inaccessible to Mad-identified students. Shelton embraces a dynamic, “reliably unreliable” approach to accessibility, working instead from the assumption that “all people are unreliable when their needs are not being met” (p. 162). Long shares how knitting came to provide “a methodological intervention [...] through reshaping the social space involved in conducting research” (p. 125). Knitting is explored as a stim, an embodied practice of storytelling and communication, and a disruption of standard research practices that validate normative ways of knowing and doing. Long strengthens and expands Mad theory and praxis by linking them with neurodivergent perspectives. The divergent connections made between knitting and its broader sociopolitical implications can only be done through the lens of a special interest.

The uneasy relationship between Mad people, their madness, and academia is highlighted throughout *a Mad turn*. The authors explored many of the same questions I have been asking myself as a Mad-identified student returning to school and applying to grad programs. Personal statements have required me to concisely explain what has shaped my values or what drives me to continue my education. Making these declarations as a Mad-identified person continues to necessitate a deeply reflective, emotionally and affectively fraught, process. I am asked to confidently assert my belonging with institutions that make it clear my belonging is conditional. I am asked to declare a future that I struggle to picture, given the near absence of Mad-identified scholars and professionals who are living wholesome, purposeful, mad lives. The insightful personal narratives in this book validated my dilemmas and showed me a possible path forward.

The emphasis on queer, trans, and gender-nonconforming mad perspectives was welcomed and appreciated. However, *a Mad turn* lacked Black, Indigenous, and otherwise racialized or colonized perspectives that would have resulted in a truly intersectional anti-methodology. In the same way Mad Studies has often centered whiteness, these chapters ultimately

centered white experiences of madness. While this omission does not subtract from the value of the book, future publications would be strengthened by the inclusion and centering of non-white perspectives.

Mad-identified academics, educators, practitioners, and other people navigate a unique set of challenges, obstacles, and dilemmas as we interact with institutions of education and care. This book uncovers those negotiations and struggles, authentically engages with them, and affirms the value and capability inherent in Mad knowledges. This book may offer guidance and insight into how to develop more positive and integrated Mad identities, and navigate sanist communities and institutions while honouring, rather than compartmentalizing, one's madness.

## References

Ingram, R. (2016). Doing Mad Studies: Making (Non)sense Together. *Intersectionalities*, 5(3), 11-17. <https://doi.org/10.48336/IJDPTS4720>

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## Disclosure statement

The author has no conflicts of interest to disclose.