

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Brenda A. LeFrançois, Robert Menzies, Geoffrey Reaume, eds. *Mad Matters: A Critical Reader in Canadian Mad Studies*. Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press, 2013. xiv + 394 pp. \$54.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-55130-534-9; \$49.99 (e-book), ISBN 978-1-55130-536-3.

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Commissioned by Iain C. Hutchison

Mad Matters: A Critical Reader in Canadian Mad Studies is a unique and excellent edited collection of works detailing the importance and evolution of mad studies, with a strong and much-needed emphasis on Canadian context and experience. While there are a number of significant contributions in this work, of specific note is the diversity of contributors, the book's commitment to examining the intersection of activism and academia, and the importance of centering understanding on the experiences of psychiatric survivors. Taken from this perspective, one of the major strengths of this work is its ability to ground analysis in the experience of psychiatric survivors and, in doing so, provide a critical counter-narrative to the psychiatric empire. This standpoint is politically significant and positions mad studies within the critical work that activists and scholars are collaboratively undertaking as part of a broader social justice movement within disability studies. Over the course of the book, readers are able to recognize the roots and role of mad studies in countering how psychiatry operates through law, policy, and knowledge production.

Divided into five parts to include history, mad engagements, critiques of psychiatry, the role of law and public policy, and social justice, the editors have done a wonderful job of situating various contributions and chapters within a broader context that helps enable the reader to connect important strands within mad studies and activism to larger and more complex questions about the law, politics, policy, history, and knowledge production. While this interdisciplinary engagement is noteworthy in itself, within this work it also serves to provide readers with a more layered analysis that, over the course of the book, highlights the many ways normality

and reason are shaped and upheld, and more critically, how mad studies and psychiatric survivors are actively providing valuable counter-narratives to confront these. The commitment to stimulate the reader's understanding of grassroots activism and psychiatric survivor narratives provides an important context that uniquely situates mad studies as both a social justice movement and critical field of inquiry.

Part 1, including several chapters that explore mad people's history (including Mel Starkman's 1981 historical analysis in the first Canadian publication to engage this issue from the perspective of mad people), highlights narratives that have historically been ignored and silenced in other areas of scholarship that explore psychiatry.[1] A strength in this section lies in its ability to re-engage this history from the standpoint of psychiatric survivors. The chapters in part 2, highlighting mad engagements, illustrate the conflicts that exist between mad activism and psychiatric power. Again, the inclusion of powerful narratives demonstrate how the mental health system operates, and crucially, the impact this has on psychiatric survivors. Part 3, consisting of chapters critiquing psychiatry, focuses on the work of some of Canada's leading mad activists and explores some of the most critical issues facing psychiatric survivors today, including engagement with community mental health, a powerful critique of electroshock, and the challenges in incorporating madness within the disability studies curriculum. Part 4 brings together chapters that explore the politics of resistance as it relates to laws and policies that shape mad struggles. Here contributors illustrate how various mechanisms of power within the public sphere operate in ways that oppress, marginalize, and erase the

experiences of psychiatric survivors. While significant on their own, taken together these chapters also provide valuable illustrations of how power operates and is experienced, and the many ways in which neoliberalism exacerbates and shapes these experiences. Finally, part 5, an exploration of social justice and identity politics, concludes the book by highlighting key and emerging issues in Canadian mad studies, including the practice of identity politics, engagement with other allied communities, notions of nationhood, and pressures of neoliberalism. In these chapters, the authors build on calls for intersectional analysis by fleshing out connections between mad studies and other structured experiences of oppression. This final section points to important issues and questions moving forward for mad studies in Canada.

The chapters assembled in this book make for an excellent resource for those new to mad studies, as well as those seeking much-needed Canadian scholarship in

this area. While several of the essays are significant and can easily stand alone as a resource for scholars, activists, and allies, a real strength of the collection lies in the way the editors have brought together and framed this work. Read as a whole, the contributions provide readers with a thorough and detailed account of mad studies within Canada that remain centered on how psychiatric survivors experience historical legacies, policies, laws, and power. In doing so, this book does indeed make a strong and compelling case that mad studies does matter and brilliantly connects the work of leading and emerging activists and scholars to a broader movement that is actively confronting psychiatric power and reshaping important histories, contributions, and activism in powerful ways.

Note

[1]. Mel Starkman, "The Movement," *Phoenix Rising: The Voice of the Psychiatrized* (1981), 2:3, 2A-9A.

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