



DiGeSt

Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies

What are you reading?

Bruce, L. M. J. (2021). *How To Go Mad Without Losing Your Mind: Madness and Black Radical Creativity*. Durham: Duke University Press.

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DiGeSt Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies, Volume 12, Issue 1

<https://doi.org/10.21825/digest.95443>

Print ISSN: 2593-0273. Online ISSN: 2593-0281

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Bruce, L. M. J. (2021). *How To Go Mad Without Losing Your Mind: Madness and Black Radical Creativity*. Durham: Duke University Press.

La Marr Jurelle Bruce, the author of *How To Go Mad Without Losing Your Mind*, writes with literary flair about a subject that has fascinated philosophers, literary scholars, and poets for centuries: the subversive character of madness. He does not conceive of this subversiveness as a threat to academic thought. Rather, he incorporates madness into his academic method, while simultaneously allowing it to challenge that methodical work. After all, the enemy of madness is, according to Bruce, academically upheld Reason – with a capitalized R. By this, Bruce means the Western episteme that is rooted in Enlightenment thought and dominated by positivism, secularism, and the belief that the quest for objective truth is fruitful (Bruce, 2021, p. 4). This Reason was and is used as an instrument of domination, exercising control over those who do not fit into the status quo and serving as a justification for the conquering of ‘Others’. In his analysis of the exclusionary nature of Reason, Bruce is indebted to thinkers like Achille Mbembe, Hortense Spillers, and Michel Foucault.

Interwoven with the idolization of Reason, then, is the dismissal of those who deviate from the norm. This is how, in Bruce’s approach, madness (being a deviation) often intersects with what he terms ‘black radical creativity’, which he defines as ‘black expressive culture that imagines, manifests, and practices otherwise ways of doing and being – all while confounding dominant logics, subverting normative aesthetics, and eroding oppressive structures of power and feeling’ (Bruce, 2021, p. 6).¹ Bruce analyses characters in novels, song lyrics, and a wide range of self-identified mad artists to unearth connections between mad (self-)expression and subversive political ideology.

His conception of the coinciding of madness and Black radical creativity in artworks and artists demands a taxonomy of madness. After all, Bruce wants to do justice both to madness as a lived experience as well as to madness as a socially constructed concept, often leveraged against Black people who refuse to comply with an anti-Black world. He distinguishes four overlapping categories of madness: phenomenal madness, or ‘an intense unruliness of mind’ (Bruce, 2021, p. 6); medicalized madness, meaning the pathologizing and codifying of madness in psychiatric diagnoses, which Bruce regards as a political process; rage, with mad meaning both crazy and angry, and Black anger being interpreted through antiblack logic as a sign of craziness; and psychosocial madness, which is the urge to label all persons crazy that deviate radically from what is considered normal. This taxonomy is especially useful when studying the appearances of madness. It leads one to be justifiably hypervigilant when encountering artists or characters deemed mad. Why is someone deemed to be mad, and by whom? What aspects of madness are highlighted in the (self-)presentation of the mad person?

As said, the four categories overlap, and Bruce demonstrates this overlap in his analyses of artworks by a wide range of Black artists. For example, when addressing Ntozake Shange’s novel *Liliane: Resurrection of The Daughter* (1994), Bruce explains how the character Hyacinthe is deemed mad by her family when she, in defiance of their customs, stops straightening her hair and proudly wears her afro, highlighting the psychosocial aspect of madness. Her parents promptly send her to an institution, medicalizing Hyacinthe’s Black pride. At the same time, this madness is also rage, in the form of Hyacinthe’s deep-felt resentment against white supremacy, sometimes tipping over into violent fantasies against white people. Hyacinthe, however, self-identifies as mad, meaning, in Bruce’s terms, that her mind is unruly. This unruliness is what leads her to being institutionalized. In the example of Hyacinthe, then, we see how her Black pride can be mangled and framed as madness, where an unruly mind is regarded as being the cause of political insubordination. The label

¹ Bruce chooses not to capitalize Black, as he ‘does not regard it as a proper noun’ (Bruce, 2021, p. 6, italics L.M.J.B.), meaning that he does not see it as a fixed entity. I, as a non-Black person of color, do choose to capitalize Black to convey respect.

‘madness’ serves to discredit her grievances and deny her pride. Bruce’s multi-faceted approach to madness helps reveal the ways in which madness is used to police deviation from dominant norms, while also understanding that deviation, or madness, is a potential site of political resistance.

Bruce inspires me to critically examine the politicization of madness, while also considering its phenomenal experience. When I, as a literary scholar, focus on the narratological aspects of a mad character’s speech, I should not lose sight of their critical potential. What I find significant in Bruce’s work is his conception of ‘mad methodology’. It encompasses what Bruce calls ‘radical compassion’ (Bruce, 2021, p. 10), meaning a willingness to care for and study ‘mad’ and ‘unReasonable’ experiences. This compassion also translates into the contextualization of the sporadic violence of madness as a response to the systematic and systemic exclusionary violence of Reason (Bruce, 2021, p. 81). Furthermore, according to a mad methodologist, madness has epistemic value. In the afterword, in which Bruce discloses his own madness, he writes: ‘I am a mad methodologist in at least two senses: first, I am a scholar who theorizes and mobilizes mad methodology; second, I am a madman devising methods for ethical madness. I know, firsthand, the ordeal of being a mad black scholar while writing a mad black book while braving an antiblack-antimad world’ (Bruce, 2021, p. 234).

The idioms of madness can be confusing at first glance, but they can harbor emancipating or liberatory insight. We just need to be open to hearing it, refusing to dismiss mad speech as meaningless or an unruly mind as disqualifying.

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