

Therí Alyce Pickens. *Black Madness :: Mad Blackness.* Duke University Press, 2019.

Speculative fiction has a nasty habit of composing futures in which Black and mad people are nonexistent. These imagined futures are miraculously devoid of such “problematic” people. But what if we read or imagined otherwise? *Black Madness :: Mad Blackness* is situated in this otherwise. As a theoretical intervention, Pickens weaves between the intersections of Blackness and madness to open a much-needed conversation.

In fact, this book is defined by its conversational tone. Eschewing the argumentative structure typical of monographs, Pickens instead puts two fields into conversation: critical race studies and critical mad studies. At the same time, the primary function of this book is “to get us to think about how we think when we think about Blackness and madness” (xi). To this end, Pickens is successful in using Black speculative fiction and novels to reveal how blackness and madness are not analogous relationships but are modifiers that unsettle clarification. Pickens argues that “[w]hen Blackness and madness exist in the same space, multiple ways of reading should become possible, some of which eschew the possibility of radicality and others that might usher it in” (34). By centering mad Black texts and characters, these two identities can be read beyond abjection, recuperation, or resistance.

In this intervention, each chapter overlaps and folds into one another to reveal four main themes. Pickens discusses the Black mad through Octavia Butler’s *Fledgling*, examines the mad Black through Nalo Hopkinson’s *Midnight Robber*, interrogates the idea of the Human through Tananarive Due’s *African Immortals* series, and lastly examines the novel form through the numerous works of Mat Johnson.

In Conversation 1, “Making Black Madness,” Pickens criticizes the utility of mutual constitution for understanding the relationship between Blackness and madness. Instead of reading physically or mentally abnormal bodies and racially abnormal bodies as “close cousins” that are reliant upon one another, Pickens challenges historical and agentive readings of these identities. As a methodology, mutual constitution implies that “race and disability announce themselves at the same time and both exert pressure in constant fashion” (27). However, the Black mad can find themselves in situations in which their conditions have different levels of salience. This is why the character Shori in *Fledg-*

ling has to navigate her blackness and amnesia to differing degrees in the Ina community. It is also why Pickens argues strongly that Blackness and madness, as identities, should not be read as primarily liberatory, since people will not always find that their conditions allow them to be agents.

In Conversation 2, “A Mad Black Thang,” Pickens examines how madness is lived within Black intraracial communities. Through the sisters Quamina and Tan-Tan, Hopkinson reveals how cognitive impairment and mental illness are understood within the Pan-Caribbean settings of the planet Toussaint and the penal colony of New Half-Way Tree. The actions of Tan-Tan are particularly noteworthy since her actions as a “Robber Queen” subvert patriarchal abuse and invert the procedures of Carnival. By taking on this role of the mad Black, Tan-Tan showcases how the boundaries between madness and sanity are actively policed by communities. According to Pickens, the community has a hand in her madness whether through coercion, complacency, or complicity. As such, Tan-Tan is allowed “the space to maneuver inside a community that has made the mistake of being silent about her trauma” (67). Yet, this maneuverability is multidimensional and ambiguous, not liberatory. Tan-Tan is not a triumphant “Robber Queen,” because the community is undecided about the validity of her sexual abuse or the reasons for her actions.

In Conversation 3, “Abandoning the Human?” Pickens argues that abjection delineates the relationship that Black and disabled subjects have with the concept of humanity. Under the views of the Enlightenment, wherein the Human is defined as “white, male, cis-gendered, straight, able-bodied, Protestant” (75), mad Black subjects are inherently disqualified. According to Pickens, Black studies and Disability studies have responded to this characterization of the Human in two ways. For those who view Blackness-as-bject, social death is a facet of everyday life that must be accepted. The Human is not recoverable. However, disability studies depict disability as “a part of human variance, a part of the spectrum of human experience” (78). Thus, although the concept of a normal human typically excludes disability, this feature of life can be clarified. That said, although these positions differ, they both criticize the ideological investments which undergird this concept of humanity, namely, whiteness and ableness. This is the lesson of Michel in *African Immortals*. He too easily uses ableism and white supremacy as the deciding factors in what is considered a worthwhile life. However, Mad Blackness can allow one to reconceive of the Human by interrogating how our preferences for unequal conditions collapse into investments of wellness that are racist and sanist.

In Conversation 4, “Not Making Meaning, Not Making Since (The End of Time),” Pickens shifts away from the notion of abjection as the primary mean-

ing for Blackness or madness to see if the value of each would subsequently change. In other words, although Black and mad subjects experience abjection, they do not live *only* in this one dimension. Here the Black novel form, particularly Mat Johnson's *Hunting in Harlem*, allows Pickens to reveal the ways in which abjection need not be resolved at a novel's culmination nor eliminated in real life. Mad Black characters do not need their Blackness or madness resolved: "Abjection, then, is not the incomplete truth the Black novel tradition needs to or seeks to avoid. Instead, it becomes part of—not primarily or exclusively—the creating and the theorizing" (111).

Lastly, there is no official conclusion to *Black Madness :: Mad Blackness*, simply another provocation to continue the conversation and keep Blackness and madness multidimensional: "What becomes clear is that one cannot get beyond either madness or Blackness but rather must find the spaces where excess, unknowability, and insanity do not account for them in all their complexity. The only way out is through" (113). In this, I join with Pickens in speculating on the futurity of Blackness and disability.

This is not to say that I am thoroughly convinced by the entirety of these conversations. There are times where multidimensionality in its excessiveness becomes imprecise and ill-defined. In the haste to decry recuperative and radical readings of madness, the same heavy hand is applied to Blackness. Thus, whereas I think Pickens does an adequate job of framing why mad studies is her preferred method of interrogation—as opposed to biopsychiatric and psychosocial fields—I find that the Blackness described here is too narrow to capture its political, global, or speculative dimensions. But these are disagreements, rather than fatal flaws, and are to be expected in any conversation.

Moreover, the benefit of engaging with *Black Madness :: Mad Blackness* is that we are able to examine our presumptions about normativity and wellness through the mad Black subject. For just as Black speculative fiction asks what futures are available for Blackness and madness, this work makes us answer why these identities are desirable. For those whose existence today was once thought to be mad or the stuff of science fiction, this is a necessary exercise. In summary, Theri Alyce Pickens asks of us to think madly. We could do worse.

Dana Francisco Miranda, *University of Massachusetts Boston*