

*Black Madness :: Mad Blackness*, by Theri Alyce Pickens. Duke University Press, 2019. 176 pp.

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Expressivist pedagogies have been used in the first year composition classroom to provide unique ways for students to connect their experiences with the cognitive process of composition. Providing space for students to engage in discourses about their identities and experiences of writing provides a unique opportunity for self-actualization and reflection that sparks cognition. When considering how students can engage in expressive writing, writing instructors should understand how expressive writing provides them an opportunity to discuss issues of identity that may not be acceptable to discuss outside of the welcoming space provided by expressivist pedagogies. In order to understand how expressivist pedagogy provides a voice to the systematically voiceless, readers can look to Pickens' perspectives on the hidden narratives that exist within the Black community in *Black Madness :: Mad Blackness*.

Particularly in first year writing classrooms, students seek opportunities to express themselves in ways they are not otherwise allowed. When engaging in expressive writing assignments, students are often willing to engage in reflections of their experiences with issues of race, gender issues, religious beliefs and dogma, and personal relationships. What often occurs here is an unheard need to express these experiences beyond their own personal reflections. Students experience a sense of empowerment when engaging in expressive writing when they identify a space for it within academic discourse. This can be a rare opportunity for both instructors and students to consider social issues that students may be reprimanded for engaging with in other cultural contexts.

In *Black Madness*, Pickens addresses the concept of mental health within the Black community by seeing oppressions related to race and disability as intersecting. Pickens points out that "The strands of what would become modern medicine worked to differentiate bodies from each other . . . where abnormal was constituted in gendered, raced, and abled terms" (25). This hints at the concept of racialism and the desire to seek racial difference through science and medicine. Because disease and illness have been historically linked to race, particularly during the days of the slave trade in America, Pickens highlights the hidden narratives of the "Black mad," as Pickens refers to them, that have been erased from history's narratives due to the historic connection between fitness and the commodification of slaves. History, as told from the white perspective, has sought to use the narrative of the Black mad as a way to establish difference.

In understanding how the establishment of difference has historically intersected between race and illness, Pickens highlights how disproportionate numbers of Blacks have been identified with mental illnesses in U.S. history by explaining that “This history makes clear that within the United States’ cultural zeitgeist, there is no Blackness without madness, nor madness without Blackness” (27). The Black experience has been one developed in tandem with madness. Because of this, madness in Black cultural contexts has been marked with the desire to erase it, angst at its presence, and a need for protecting its existence. These various perceptions of Black madness within the Black community have often prohibited narratives and discourses around Black mental illness.

Pickens considers ways in which narratives of the Black mad have been difficult to find because of the lack of representation that forces mental illness within the Black community to be stigmatized. Pickens points to the fact that while many Black celebrities have been outspoken about their children with disabilities, hearing the narratives of those Black children with mental illness is often a rarity. This creates a loss of identity when the self can not be fully expressed in its own words. Pickens traces this loss of identity and citizenship back to slavery, when slaveowners could be reimbursed for their purchase of mentally unfit slaves. Mental fitness became a determining factor of the fitness and worthiness of a slave, which cemented its place within the Black community as a threat to one’s worthiness as an individual.

The idea of worthiness within the Black community is crucial. Revealing hidden narratives through expressivist pedagogy allows for a space of acceptance and inclusion that is often missing from Black communities when discussing issues of mental illness. Pickens points out that “to theorize the concept of the mad Black or mad Blackness opens up critical space to consider how the discourses of madness and Blackness not only operate in intraracial spaces but also intensify and dismantle common understandings of each other” (57). Providing these spaces for discourse through expressivist pedagogy allows students opportunities to engage with their experiences that may not be discussed even within their own cultural contexts. Understanding the tension surrounding Black madness is important when engaging students in expressive writing that allows them to talk about their own struggles with mental health through their own narratives rather than to have these narratives written for or about them.

Extending the concept of expressivist pedagogy into critical expressivist practices engages students in discourses of memory and experience. In “Communication as Social Action,” Patricia Boyd looks at the impact of writing as a socially transformative endeavor. Boyd points out that “instead of seeing communication as empty exercises or as tools to only analyze social texts rather than change society, students can learn to see writing—and social discussions—as social action—i.e., a way of being an agent in public discourses” (108).

Expressivist pedagogy has the potential to bring life to the writing process. In understanding how concepts of Black madness have seen the systematic silencing of individuals' own narratives of their experiences as the Black mad, teachers and students can look to the ways in which critical expressivism can provide opportunities for social discourse.

Social discourse stems from identity, which is a visceral part of composition and communication. Divorcing concepts of identity from the writing process prohibits a deep engagement with practices of rhetorical discourse. Defining identity and Black madness can truly be done by those experiencing it. Understanding how the narrative of Black mad identity has been shaped and formed by those outside of the experience points to the need for those experiencing it to create their own narratives. Expressivist pedagogy provides a clear opportunity for that.

In *Black Madness*, Pickens identifies ways in which the Black mad can often lose their sense of identity in considerations of the politicization and commodification dating back to slavery. However, providing inclusive space for those within the Black community to develop their own narratives invites a sense of humanity that has historically lacked space and presence. Much research and scholarly discussion shows that students struggle to engage in discourses that lie outside of the scope of their experiences. In order to move students from the positionality of academic tourism in the classroom to a deep engagement and identification of their own voice, expressivist pedagogy must be an integral part of the process of writing.

In understanding how concepts of cultural silencing of certain narratives have been stigmatized within specific communities, instructors can seek opportunities from this text to engage in conversations and critical analysis of these discourses using expressivist pedagogy. The first year composition classroom offers a unique opportunity for students to engage in the reflection on their own experiences in the realm of academic discourse. This text not only provides a lens into the systematic silencing of narratives but also into the rhetorical power of silencing to help students find ways to challenge it through their classroom writing practices.

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## **Work Cited**

Boyd, Patricia W. "Communication as Social Action: Critical Expressivist Pedagogies in the Writing Classroom." *Critical Expressivism: Theory and Practice in the Composition Classroom*, edited by Tara Roeder and Roseanne Gatto. WAC Clearinghouse, 2014, pp. 107-121. DOI: 10.37514/PER-B.2014.0575.