

Margaret Price

Mad at School: Rhetorics of Mental Disability and Academic Life

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The academy has long been heralded as the bastion of reason, a bellicose trope so familiar, its objectives so commonsensical, that it has become definitive of what it means to be an academic. We are the defenders of reason. Rationality is the benchmark by which our scholarship is measured and the standard by which we evaluate our students' performance---perhaps nowhere more so than in the field of philosophy. As feminist scholars know well, however, "common sense" often masks a number of ideologies. In the case of higher education, Margaret Price argues in *Mad at School*, our fiercely guarded bastion of reason is mortared by ableism. A groundbreaking and deeply compelling study of the fraught intersection between mental disability and higher education in the United States, *Mad at School* poses a radical challenge to some of the most deeply rooted assumptions about the academy and those welcomed within its walls. Price's perspective is drawn from disability studies and rhetoric/composition, and she is clearly writing for these audiences. However, *Mad at School* welcomes all disciplinary comers to its pages: field-specific terminology is carefully defined and disciplinary concerns are contextualized and explained. Price's beautiful prose draws the reader through the book; it is rare indeed to encounter an academic book as elegantly written as it is theoretically rich.

Mad at School is conceptually anchored by Price's vision of academe as a collection of "kairotic spaces." Kairotic spaces are marked by "the real-time unfolding of events; impromptu communication that is required or encouraged; in-person contact; a strong social element; and high stakes" (61). In rhetorical studies, the ancient Greek concept of *kairos* is usually translated as the right or opportune time (as opposed to *chronos*, or linear time). However, *kairos* also conveys a sense of space, environment, and attitude, which is how Price uses the term (60; Sheard 1993, 306). Yet there is an older meaning of *kairos* that cements the relationship of kairotic space and disability even further. In Homer, *kairos* refers to "the lethal or critical point for the body to receive a wound," such as the vulnerable heel of Achilles (Wilson 1980, 5). *Kairos*, then, designates both a moment of opportunity (for the archer) as well as a place of critical vulnerability (for the target). In much the same way, although kairotic spaces produce opportunities for some (such as the job candidate who cracks a well-timed joke or the student who easily navigates class discussion) they also target vulnerabilities in others (such as the job candidate with depression who, after a night of insomnia, struggles to find a word and is interpreted as flustered or unintelligent, or the stammering student who is dismissed as disruptive).

Kairotic spaces may be "where knowledge is produced" but they are also, Price argues, citing Foucault, where "power is exchanged" (60).

After the introduction and chapter 1, which situate *Mad at School* firmly within the disability studies and rhetoric/composition literature, the book hits its stride with chapter 2, "Ways to Move," a deft analysis of how mental disability intersects with the kairotic space of the classroom and its policies. Chapter 2 calls into question the unstated assumption of what it means to be "present" in the classroom, literally and figuratively. How many of our classroom policies assume typical body-minds? And how many students with mental disabilities---students on the autism spectrum, say, or those experiencing intense emotional states like depression, anxiety, or mania---are disabled by the very design of our courses? Inspired by universal design principles, Price closes this chapter with concrete suggestions about how to make our classrooms more accessible for all students; but sensitive to the many contingencies of teaching, she offers "a tasting menu rather than a course-by-course meal" (90). Some of the recommendations are surprisingly easy to implement, such as expanding syllabus statements of accommodation to emphasize the varieties of learning differences or reviewing our policies on participation. I was so thoroughly persuaded by Price's argument in this chapter that I have since significantly revised my syllabic language with regard to participation, particularly words like "attention" with regard to students' engagement during class time.

Chapter 3, "The Essential Functions of the Position" continues the argument of chapter 2. Turning its attention to the structural challenges facing mentally disabled faculty, this chapter examines how the requirements for academic success and promotion, chiefly collegiality and productivity, also operate to exclude faculty (and would-be faculty) by design. Taking us from the kairotic spaces of the job interview to fluorescently lit, noisy conference rooms, chapter 3 shows how many of the stated (and, perhaps more important, the unstated) requirements for academic life are modeled on a neurotypical mind and abled body. "What might universal design come to mean in professional kairotic space?" Price wonders (105), answering her question at the end of the chapter with a number of recommendations, which, like those in chapter 2, are offered in a "spirit of pragmatic hopefulness" (119) rather than as a one-size-fits-all prescription. The suggestions are as much individual and attitudinal as structural. I was struck, for example, by the profound respect demonstrated by the simple question *What do you need?* which Price suggests as part of a "micropractice of accessibility" equally applicable to students and faculty (134).

The stakes of the accessibility chapter 3 calls for are illustrated in chapter 6, which uses interviews with three independent scholars to provide a view from the other side of the bastion's walls. I mention this chapter here because although it serves as an excellent capstone to the book, it also powerfully illustrates the implications of chapter 3. Independent scholars are often imagined to have chosen a life outside of the academy. "However," Price points out, "given the inaccessibility of teaching (and speaking, and writing) spaces available in academe, it becomes evident that avoidance of these spaces may be a survival strategy rather than a true choice" (228), an argument that also adds a new layer to the timely, pressing issue of contingent labor in higher education. To foster inclusivity (not to mention encouraging fresh perspectives), Price proposes that we rethink scholarship from both inside and outside the academy as *interdependent* scholarship, echoing calls from other fields (for example, Nicolescu 2002; Hayles 2012) to

expand the types of work as well as the varieties of expertise that might be properly called "academic."

Chapter 4, "Assaults on the Ivory Tower," examines the representation of mental illness in media accounts of Cho Seung-Hui (who killed thirty people at Virginia Tech in 2007) and Steve Kazmierczak (who killed seven people at Northern Illinois University in 2008). Careful not to trivialize the men's horrific actions, Price shows how representations of Cho and Kazmierczak relied on stereotypes of mental disability to explain their violence. Although the chapter is one of the most compelling in the book, and although Price highlights the role of the men's race and gender, I found myself wanting just a little more intersectional analysis here, particularly with regard to the relationship between masculinity and mental disability. Likewise, an intersectional lens might have even further enriched the incisive analysis in chapter 5, "Her Pronouns Wax and Wane." Using close readings of three women's disability autobiographies, Price shows how the authors' use of pronouns acts as a form of "counter-diagnosis," a way of challenging, attacking, and queering institutional diagnostic narratives (179). However, as Price herself notes, *Mad at School* is not meant to be the final word on mental disability and the academy, but the beginning of a conversation, citing intersectional analysis as one of a number of potential avenues for future studies of mental disability (231).

Hypatia's readership will find much in the book to interest them. *Mad at School* would be ideal in graduate courses devoted to issues of gender and disability, for example, where I imagine students would be inspired to take up some of the intersectional and transnational analyses Price invites in the book's conclusion. But more importantly, *Mad at School* should interest anyone who cares about the future of higher education---even those who are not explicitly working or teaching in disability studies. Why? Because mentally disabled students and faculty "are sitting beside you. No, we *are* you" (Brueggemann et al. 2001, 369; cited in Price, 87). If those comfortably positioned in the bastion of reason were to implement even a few of Price's recommendations in the spirit of "micro-rebellion" (86), I am convinced the academy would be a better place. "I wrote this book," Price memorably writes at the end of the introduction, "because I could not go on any longer without writing it" (24). Academics committed to access and equality in higher education should not go any longer without listening to what *Mad at School* has to say.

References

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