

The work by Karl Hepfer is well-arranged and well-structured and has a clear style. I also appreciate the author's dry humour which is present in many of his explanations. Each chapter is followed by an example of a conspiracy theory through which the author discusses his methodological tools of analysis of such narratives. Thus, he does a great job of helping the reader to understand his interpretations, while offering a nice collection of conspiracy theories.

GABRIELA KILIÁNOVÁ,  
Institute of Ethnology and Social Anthropology  
of Slovak Academy of Sciences, v. v. i. in Bratislava

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### About the Monkey and Other(ing) Stories

WIESNER, ADAM:

Monkey on My Back. An Autoethnographic Narrative of a Therapeutic Experience

Bratislava: Institute of Ethnology and Social Anthropology SAS, Bratislava, 2020 & VEDA, Publishing House of the SAS, 2020, 219 p.

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*“After all, you are just another me and I am just another you.”*

~ Rumi

It is quite difficult to write a review for this book. I could say that it's even impossible, or in fact, even unnecessary. Not because it is not attractive enough, professional enough or empirically supported enough, because it does fulfill all these attributes. But because any further verbal expression will only be another weakened experience and more watered down information. Any evaluation would serve as an act of power. I also don't want any reader to lose the opportunity to experience – understand and feel – this book in their own way. I will therefore try to find a balance between sufficient presentation of content and approaches, while maintaining secrecy and not “revealing” more than necessary. I will rather try a kind of sensitive, humble and concise retelling of this unique story because as the author himself

writes: "This book was supposed to be a story. Despite its fragmentation and incoherence, with no clear end and no clear beginning, it is still a story" (p. 171).

In an exclusively anthropological context, the book is refreshing from several points of view. The connecting link of the used approaches is precisely "story", which as Adam pointed out is "a key concept in this book" (p. 27) and at the same time represents a kind of intersection between (auto)ethnographic, (psycho)therapeutic and spiritual practice. Methodologically based on autoethnography and the narrative method, the author shows where an anthropological text can go if its intention is to be ontologically, epistemologically, methodologically and especially ethically "pure", and at the same time socially engaged and empowering – towards the writer and the reader. Interpretive autoethnography perceives stories "like pictures that have been painted over, and, when paint is scraped off an old picture, something new becomes visible" (Denzin, 2014: 1). It is based on a broader postmodern understanding of ethnography as a genre, which, however, Denzin does not consider "an innocent practice. Our research practices are performative, pedagogical, and political. Through our writing and our talk, we enact the worlds we study. These performances are messy and pedagogical. They instruct our readers about this world and how we see it. The pedagogical is always moral and political; by enacting a way of seeing and being, it challenges, contests, or endorses the official, hegemonic ways of seeing and representing the other" (Denzin, 2006: 422). Adam's "honest autoethnographic exploration" in accordance with the approach of Ellis and Bochner (2000: 738), obviously "generates a lot of fears and doubts – and emotional pain. Just when you think you can't stand the pain anymore, well, that's when the real work has only begun..."

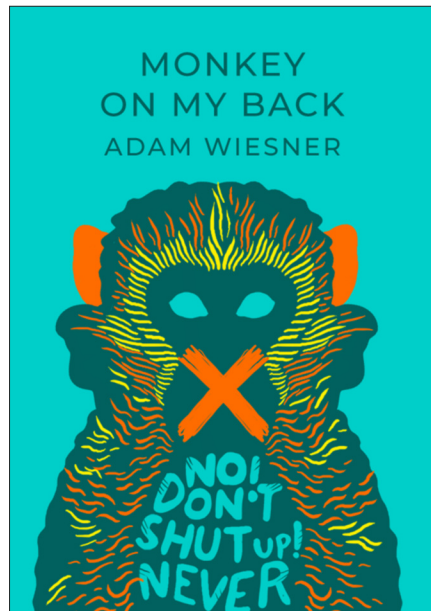
If the "story" here becomes the methodological link of approaches and the key that gives the text form in the shape of a personal narrative, then emotions are the epistemological link and its content. They are present everywhere and permeate the entire text. According to Jaggar (1989), we can clearly recognize here the epistemic potential of emotions, when Adam's personal narrative definitely subverts the myth of dispassionate investigation, what's more, here it makes emotions an epistemic source of knowledge. Through various forms of emotions the author builds his personal story as the narrative method practice, which at the same time immediately turns into therapeutic experience and becomes narrative therapy practice. Narrative therapy, as developed by therapist Michael White and anthropologist David Epston, belongs to the postmodern therapeutic approaches and uses narrative metaphor in order to discover and map as yet untold alternative story-lines (White, Epston, 1990), just like here. The circle is closing according to Adam's methodological approach, when evolutionary astrology in the form of a symbolic language is for him a useful resource for creating a map of alternative narratives that challenge the status quo of the dominant normative discourse (p. 121). Starting from evolutionary astrology as the unique symbolic system and finding methodological correlations between "doing autoethnography" and "doing evolutionary astrology", this leads to a conscious effort to apply the interpretive practice of evolutionary astrology as a reflexive tool for (auto)ethnographic practice, as well as a way how to sharpen the autoethnographic potential (p. 38). As Adam pointed out: "...my cognitive healing was a long process that cannot be separated from the emotional and spiritual healing I have undergone on my journey to empower myself as a unique individual..." (p. 65).

As the author (re)searches the way to find a balance between rationality, emotionality and spirituality, the book is, at the same time, a scientific monograph, a (psycho)therapeutic and spiritual text, as well as, albeit methodologically grounded, still a personal confession. As the author writes, it "is a hybrid genre" (p. 11). This is where I perceive the uniqueness of this publication: it connects seemingly incompatible worlds, ways of thinking, methodological

inspirations. The author finds common paradigms and parallels where unexpected; where conflict is usually expected, he finds harmony. Against the background of the author's personal story of crisis and healing, the reader learns how his personal trajectory was influenced by the postmodern philosophy of the West as well as the ancient teachings of the East. And all this in a time that does not even flow linearly here. Let's embark on an adventurous journey into the darkness of the soul (and body), where demons and monsters become (real) guides, where the borders between Me, You and We blurs, where soul and body merge into One, where the heartbeat of hu/wo/man (who cares?) becomes the eternal pounding of Mother Earth...

The author's preface "About the book" justifies its origin, but it is also a kind of a guide to reading the book, a mind map, while discussing the main epistemological, theoretical and methodological starting points on which the text is further based. Adam<sup>1</sup> shows how postmodern and critical "Mad or Monster Studies", based on (still unconventional) queer autoethnography and traditional Indian astrology, can be two equivalent methodological tools that have much in common. However, his goal is not research itself, but it is (re)search, finding oneself with the help of scientific research practices, which in parallel become therapeutic, because this autoethnographic narrative is becoming an integral part of (his) therapeutic process: "My (re)searching and my not giving up was also therapeutic, as was the final stage of writing about it" (p. 25).

The author gradually reveals his positionality in the story, goes deeper and deeper into the topics, examines them from different angles, returns to them; as he describes the admitted perspectives, all the while the reader gets more and more acquainted with Adam, and at the same time s/he identifies himself with him. However, the author does not privilege or condemn any of his perspectives, all of them together form a mosaic of his story and give him not only plasticity, but also credibility, authenticity and erudition. In his narration he speaks from a perspective: "mentally disordered" & psychiatric survivor, non-binary & transgender person,<sup>2</sup> (re)searcher & queer autoethnographer, postmodern therapist, also practicing astrologer and practicing Buddhist, but in particular he manifests himself here as a multidimensional human being. The text moves from one perspective to another, which makes the story dynamic and harmonious at the same time. It is through their complete confession that the author finds



1 Occasionally I use the author's first name here, when the title "author" sounds too impersonal to me according to the text; it is referring also to my personal, yet still professional, relation to the author, and I often led a virtual inner dialogue with him while reading the book. I also consulted using the masculine pronoun for this paper.

2 He shared his experience with the transition process in his first book, *The Only Certainty Is Change. Autoethnography on a transgender topic* (2017), where through autoethnography he problematizes his own diagnostic process in connection with the process of transition as a non-binary person, and reflects his positionality in the field as a scientist, transgender activist and transgender person.

himself in a very vulnerable position, which is probably impossible not to share empathetically, and this is exactly what makes his “alternative story” a spirited inspiration, both human and scientific.

As the author writes: “I write for myself and I write for others: to make sense of my experience, and to inspire” (p. 41). But for whom is the book (not) intended? The complex language of the postmodern style of writing, interwoven with frequent – equally tuned – quotes from scientific books of various specializations, can easily discourage the lay reader, although it can also be a transgender person. It can also discourage a rationally oriented scholarly reader, by its transcendence into emotionality, spirituality and (psycho)therapeutic practice; spiritually oriented people, in turn, may be discouraged by scientifically oriented parts of the text, practitioners may be overwhelmed by theory. Just as the role of traditional science is to create categories, and as science often puts people in their various “boxes”, this book exposes these “boxes” as unproductive, even harmful, and takes them to the dustbin of history (scientific thinking and writing). The book, therefore, intuitively calls people who are searching, questioning, subverting and transcending the boundaries of the normative, the rational, the possible.

The book is divided into three chapters. In the first chapter, Adam disrupts contemporary psychiatry against the background of his personal experience with “healing”, and describes his state of mind as what he recognized that time as anxiety. His mental health, on one hand, relates to the current state of society; life in the neoliberal capitalist era is the time of social and personal crisis: “The unceasing push to produce and to consume is simply too overwhelming and often results in a feeling of inadequacy, once the tempo gets too fast for us to keep up with the rest” (p. 50). On the other hand he describes huge pressure according to his most vulnerable position: the transgender person who went through the process of transition and formally needed official medical treatment, despite the fact that he criticized the system as oppressive and traumatizing: “I have to prove that I am trans enough to be diagnosed, and at the same time sane enough not to be excluded from the treatment” (p. 57). As he writes here about principles of postmodern therapy, he writes about reasons for refusing official psychiatry treatment and describes his own process of healing, with the perspective of therapy recipient and therapist at the same time. During the narrative therapy practice the Monkey (the main character of the story) came to his awareness. What the Monkey is, according to Adam’s interpretation, how and why he approached it further, and how it helped him in his healing process, is probably the main story line of his narrative.

The second chapter concentrates more on Indian evolutionary astrology or “language of the stars” which Adam uses as a tool of autoethnographic reflexivity, as well as an interpretive method. Through this symbolic language he interprets and puts the various periods of his life in context, especially the times of distress. The reader can find astrological interpretation together with the neuroscientific information about the limbic system and amygdala, where the trauma memory is stored all on one page; elsewhere we read about the deep indigenous knowledge, or we read the author’s emotionally touching words about his brother and mother, and his close relation with Mother Earth. That’s the magic of this book. Just these alternative stories, which an evolutionary astrology helped him to create, gave him freedom, the possibility to choose, are the desirable outcomes of the gnawing physical reality of living his unique embodied experience. His individual astrological constellations (illustrated by charts in an attachment of the book), is contextualized here with the global happening, world events and overall collective consciousness. According to Adam, under the stars’ influences: “... we are offered a chance to learn, again, how to honour the planet as an irreplaceable life force and life energy, how to create new alternative

ways of community building and sharing resources” (p. 132) and within this space support we can step out of our limitations into the unknown. It is the time.

The third chapter delves deeper into the therapy, here the author especially concentrates on mindfulness – a therapeutic skill inspired by Buddhist tradition, and also healing power of loving kindness through insight concentration, breathing, watching body signals, and release.

For me this was the most touching part of the book, where the author describes his journey of “embodied inquiry”, as well as embodied psychotherapeutic and spiritual treatment: “All this time, my body was speaking to me and I did not listen!” (p. 152). Adam’s rediscovery of his body caused apparently a huge reversion and transformation in his healing process, and transcribed conversation with his (trans)body is just beautiful, and purifying. “All this time with the ‘Monkey on my back’, my body has been there with me. Not as mere flesh and bones but as an invaluable, intelligent vessel, allowing the consciousness to inhabit it, allowing my experience of being a human” (p. 155–156).

In conclusion I would like to mention the overall visual design of the book. Especially the cover, which complements the content perfectly, as well as the chosen colors influenced and created a unique kind of energy, which stimulates positive emotions and vibrations. Reading it was something almost like a ritual moment, when you can touch the sacred, catch the transcendent, while still standing on the ground. This whole empowering story sounds very intimate to me, as an feminist (re)searcher (thank you, Adam, for this expression), woman and mother, learner of accepting my female body, listener to my animal spirit guides, deeply connected to Mother Earth. There is probably no better deadline for finishing my text as during the Flower or Buddha Moon, Scorpio full Moon (combined in 2022 with lunar eclipse which makes it Blood Moon), the most magical and powerful full Moon, when Siddharta became The Buddha and attained enlightenment.<sup>3</sup> Adam’s story becomes my story – it becomes our story – in each moment of any distress, the overwhelming emotions, when our demons and monsters come out of the caves, in moments when the sadness, fears and shadows push us down and we cannot remember who we are... But as the rite of passage we can follow this experience and find our own ways out of the Darkness, accept her and thank for everything she came to teach us.<sup>4</sup>

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3 *Dear Darkness* by PJ Harvey (<https://youtu.be/rXOccIZ7Ojs>).

4 Scorpio (also my ascendent) is one of the most transformative signs of the zodiac. Paired with a lunar eclipse, this full Moon becomes a potent time for change and immense psychological breakthroughs. It is a time of revelation, when our shadows come out to be seen. Our unprocessed emotions come out to heal, our suppressed memories are triggered to awaken, and it is obvious how we project our wounds onto others. Ruled by water and the planet Pluto, Scorpio asks us to confront our deepest emotions. In doing so, Scorpio reminds us that we are magicians and healers. We can transform any energy, emotion, or behaviour. We can turn darkness into light, and tension into relaxation. We can heal from the most painful wounds and turn them into wisdom. As we work with the power of Scorpio this full Moon and eclipse, we also work with the power of Taurus in Sun. Scorpio and Taurus both want us to become completely absorbed in the present moment. They ask us to set aside our anxiety about the future or pain of the past and feel the moment. Taurus encourages us to connect with nature and use our senses to find presence. In contrast, Scorpio asks us to connect with our inner world and release emotional reactions to find presence. Both these signs ask us to align with the rhythms of the Universe – Taurus, by connecting with the Earth, and Scorpio by connecting with ourselves. Over this eclipse, we have the opportunity to feel as one with everything around us and to know that we are part of the magic in the Universe. We can feel how we are made of the same energy as the trees, the oceans, the mountains, and the stars...

“When the evening session comes, I again invite the ‘Monkey’ in, only to realize it is already there. The pressure weakens. There is no need for combat. There is no enemy to fight against. I sit and breathe. The voices are silent. Nothing happens. The experience of nothing happening is pleasant and warm, for a change. I welcome it” (p. 164). Dear readers, dear stargazers, welcome to the “New Age” of Science. Keep calm and breathe...So be it.

KAMILA KOZA BEŇOVÁ,  
Faculty of Humanities University of Matej Bel in Banská Bystrica

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