

Lessons in Yielding: Crip Refusal and Ethical Research Praxis

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I wanted this bit of autoethnography to give you something, to be of use to you, to be user friendly, not knowing who the users might be. So I said in the abstract I initially wrote for this chapter that I would end with a set of lessons for yielding.

But who am I to give you lessons? Especially when writing a piece about my own failures. Of course, that right there is the problem, isn't it? The idea that mastery is a precondition for giving lessons. The idea of mastery itself (see Singh 2018).

The Skinny

I have been called many things in my life. I made a list of them once. I was cofacilitating a course called Disability Inside Out. The course was a series of modules led by disabled scholars, writers, and activists, some of whom I was also in community with. In a module led by one of the field's key figures, we were asked to write a long list of all the words we use to name ourselves. Then we were asked to write another long list of all the words others have used to name us. Finally, we were asked to write a paragraph or two about a word on one of these lists. I assumed I would write about a word related to gender or queerness. But the prompt was more specific than that. We were asked to choose a word that “has burrowed into your body.”

I looked at my two lists. I noticed the words that appeared on both. I noticed the words that I called myself but others didn't. I noticed the words others called me that I didn't claim. I thought about what word had burrowed into my body. I was surprised by the word that presented itself—a word used by others and not by me: *skinny*.

Skinny is, of course (though not only), a gendered word. It describes the ideal embodied state for normative white femininity. This was always a problem for me as a white queer who cherished her female masculinity back when she was just a wee tomboy inseparable from her blue Benetton sweat suit and pirate sword. But *skinny* comes with other baggage too—the ideal embodiment of white femininity always also carrying the suggestion of weakness, which is in turn always also freighted with an aura of incapacity (Garland-Thompson 1997, 19–29). *Skinny* sits squarely at the intersection of hetero-femininity, whiteness, and disability. *Skinny* does a lot of heavy lifting.

I realized as I reflected on the word as it had named me, but not been claimed by me, that in my small-bodied queerness, I had always turned to feats of strength to manifest my queerness, because of the queerness of feats of strength performed by a small-bodied white girl. As a little kid, I would rearrange furniture, hauling my bed from one wall to another. As a bigger kid, I would arm-wrestle and ask young adults if I could try to pick them up, relishing their sudden change in expression as their toes left the ground with my small arms wrapped around their upper legs. As an adult, I always offered to do the heavy lifting, to move the couch up the stairs, to carry the groceries. I never asked others for extra muscle. I was reluctant to accept it when offered (which is how I once managed to drop a futon frame on my neck). In short, I rebelled against the imputed white hetero-femininity of *skinny* by doubling down on a form of boyish butchness underwritten by ableism. A version of what queercrip scholar Jess Waggoner calls “gaybleism” (Waggoner 2020).

This proclivity for queer feats of strength became central to my practices of worldmaking, caring for relations, and manifesting myself. It joined up with the modes of hospitality—particularly the hosting and feeding of beloved others—that are so important to me, and that also sometimes require heroic labor. It was braided together with my capacity to weather the punishing expectations of success in the academy (see Nishida 2016). It was a part of what allowed me to spread myself very, very thin while caring and laboring for the many projects and people to whom I understood myself to be obligated.

I have found all of these things nourishing, as well as exhausting. They are the things I understand myself to be made of. They are the substance of most of my relations.

I have also been rewarded for these things. Rewarded for my skinniness by a white world that equates it with health, by a white straight world that equates it with feminine desirability, by a queer world that ratifies my small-bodied performance of strength as a desirable form of queerness. Professionally, my exhausting, overextended academic labors have been rewarded with prestige and remuneration and almost unfathomably stable employment. My internalized ableism, born of a queer reaction formation, had set me up for success.

Crip Refusal

For about twenty years, I have been in relation to disability community. By which I mean it was then that I began to count disabled writers and scholars and activists and worldmakers among the web of relations within which I made myself. Introduced to these worlds by my partner, who lived in them, I cultivated friends and relations within them through forms of hospitality and care.

While my understanding of disability as an axis of embodied social difference became radicalized by these relations, and by the poetry and scholarship and

activism that they introduced me to, disability didn't become part of my research until a few years later. I didn't start graduate school with research interests in disability or embodiment. I didn't plan to do dissertation fieldwork anchored in those topics either. Yet some months into my fieldwork, I found myself buying copies of the canonical book *The Ultimate Guide to Sex and Disability* for injured soldiers I was working with. I ended up writing a dissertation and then a book that dealt centrally with disability, masculinity, and heteronormativity in the contemporary United States.

This convergence of my world and my work brought a divergence into stark relief: the divergence between the generative and complex ways disability, gender, sexuality, and care were intertwined in queer crip projects I knew (those of Eli Clare and Sins Invalid in particular) and the paucity of disability imaginaries in the exemplarily heteronormative space of military and postmilitary life in the United States. Exploring this divergence, and creating traffic across it, became the crux of my next (and still ongoing) book project, tentatively titled *The Significance of Others*.

I began designing the project around the loose assemblages of mutual support known as care collectives (McArthur 2014) or care webs (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018), one in New York City that I participated in and others in the Bay Area that I was connected to. I started talking to disabled friends about the project, asking if they might be interested in participating, if they had any feedback about the framing, if there were other people they thought I should talk to. My friends were excited about the project and echoed my own sense of the problematically deep divide between injured veterans and regular old disabled folks, a distinction between the worthy and unworthy disabled not unlike the distinction between the worthy and unworthy poor.

The friend whose care collective I was part of in New York City said he'd be happy to participate in the research. Incentivized by my new institution to apply for outside funding in my first two years as a faculty member, I began working on a big grant proposal for the project. I described doing participant observation in care collectives, as well as fieldwork with injured US veterans. I wrote about how my own involvement with or connection to these collectives would facilitate my research access.

And then I got a lesson in yielding.

I was talking on the phone to an acquaintance, A., an artist whom I knew through mutual disability networks and whose work had been formative for my thinking about disability and care. I expected A. to be on board with the project in the helpful and frictionless ways others had been. I hoped that she'd be willing to let me do participant observation as part of her care collective, and that I'd be able to say so in my grant proposal. I don't remember her exact words, but I do remember the mild sense of panic tinged with shame that I felt when she pointed out that it would hardly be worth the labor of training someone to do

support work and integrating them into a care schedule if they'd only be there for a month or two each year—the standard summer research schedule I planned for the five-year project. I wanted to object that I was actually a quick study and very good support worker. But I was being insecure and defensive. Of course, she was right, expert as she was in coordinating her own care and participating in the care of others. It was a moment that reminded me that humility is an ethical and political research imperative (see Liboiron 2021).

I kept talking. I explained that I would compensate interview participants by barter, offering them two hours of my time for every hour they offered me. I had arrived at the idea of barter in conversation with disabled friends who helped me think through how to balance a spirit of reciprocity with the utility and value of transactional forms of compensation, even for exchanges situated within longer-term and more robust relations. I was pleased with this barter idea. A. was not impressed, but only because she took such a practice of reciprocity for granted. I realized that perhaps I had been so pleased with this barter idea because I measured it by the yardstick of prestigious grants, where such practices were valued, but not *de rigueur*, and therefore all the more special.

A. asked me why I chose to offer two hours of my time for every hour someone gave me. Again, mild panic. I explained that it seemed only fair, a matter of equity: I likely had a greater margin of energy, time, and money to spare than those I'd be interviewing. And their contributions would generate value for me in a sphere of (academic) capital to which they had no access, so I owed them some kind of surplus. It was a small way of addressing the irreducibly extractive nature of ethnographic research. But, she said, you have your own limits. Calling me in with real generosity, she pointed out that by offering double what I was being given, I was instantiating myself as doubly capacitated, as inexhaustible. That I was not allowing my own limits, my own vulnerabilities, into the transaction, into the intersubjective relation. That I wasn't attending to the possibility that I might become overwhelmed or burned out. That I was excluding myself as a subject of my own practices of care. This was an invitation to yield.

This was an invitation born of A.'s ethical refusal (see Simpson 2014).¹ A refusal to participate in a research project that wouldn't be worth the labor, despite the involvement of beloved others within her world, and despite being carried out by someone who was already positioned within it. A refusal to allow a certain logic of equity to pass untroubled when that logic relied on the myth of the invulnerable researcher. A refusal to allow my heroic forms of care to escape accountability for their ableism. This was a refusal anchored in crip ways of being and caring. A crip refusal (see also Lee 2021).

A few years after this conversation, when I was invited to contribute to this book, I asked A. if she'd like to cowrite this piece with me. She said she wasn't taking on any new writing projects and welcomed me to take ownership of the

way that our conversation had felt like an invitation and made meaning for me. Another generous and generative crip refusal. A refusal I hope finds itself well met here.

Queer Failure

In his book *The Queer Art of Failure*, Jack Halberstam (2011) offers a scrappy and celebratory orientation to the ways queerness is coded as straight failure. Halberstam has been something of a posterchild for the unrequited relationship between queer and crip theory (Kafer 2013; McRuer and Mollow 2012), a “bad romance” (Johnson 2015) in which queer theory stakes its claim to differences of illness (HIV and AIDS) and madness and itinerant life course trajectories, ground already well tended and cared for by crip theory, without acknowledging that work or joining in that care. The relationship between crip and queer theory has changed dramatically in recent years, grown closer with the ascendancy (some would say appropriation) of crip theory into the sharpest edges and coolest corners of critical theory, and the inclusion of disability as one of the canonical forms of embodied social difference, alongside race and gender.

But the embrace of failure as a queer art is still an embrace that simultaneously erases the “‘feels like shit’ dimension of failure” (Johnson 2015, 225) which remains a painful part of disabled life for those who can’t or don’t or won’t measure up to standards of success or worthiness or desirability in heteronormative *or* queer worlds. The queer art of failure is a partial embrace of failure that doesn’t recognize its partiality. In that, it risks undermining projects of disabled worldmaking, epistemology, and justice by making the “feels like shit” dimension of failure the “part that has no part” (Povinelli 2011, 47) in the inverted and reclaimed space of queer possibility that Halberstam’s failure as art names. In this, queer failure manifests the friction between *queer* and *crip*, a queer reluctance to embrace the cripness with which it is intertwined.

The queer failure I want to name is my own. The failure of my own queerness to yield to the crip worlds I was part of. A failure to yield to the limits of my own capacities, despite my commitments to radical disability worlds, and despite the ways that my own capacities fall within most definitions of disability. My failure to see the way that my queer skinny ass had thrown the crip value of mutual vulnerability under the bus and called it reciprocity.

Ethical Research Praxis

I ended up offering an hour-for-hour barter in my research protocols. Only three participants took me up on it. One gave my hours to a friend who needed help running errands after a big move. I helped another edit some professional documents, but those hours blurred into the tasks of an ongoing professional

mentorship. The third said it seemed silly since I already contributed to their life and work, but the promised labor eased the way for me to fill in when they were between care workers and needed support making dinner for friends.

I didn't end up doing participant observation in care collectives. The friend whose collective I was part of in New York City passed away the winter before we would have started. Learning from A's crip refusal, I decided to at least begin the project with interviews, which seemed less fraught, and perhaps less costly for others.

Throughout the fifteen years since my first fieldwork experiences gave me a sense of the particular mix of intimacy and extractivism that characterized the kind of ethnographic research I learned to do, I had been willing to "stay with the trouble" (Haraway 2016). I named ethnography as irreducibly extractive for my undergraduate and graduate students and tried to help them reckon with it in their own ways. But as my relations in and to the field became ever more "patchy" (Günel, Varma, and Watanabe 2020)—amid the exigencies of teaching schedules, the white antiracist commitments to institutional rabbleroxing that came with joining the professoriate, my own small projects of worldmaking, and the urgencies of "sandwich generation" life—I found it harder and harder to build relations in the field thick enough to bear this ethnographic extraction in a way that felt justifiable.

These, of course, are not new troubles. We are lucky to have generations of insight and wisdom to help us grapple with the extractive nature of ethnographic research, from Zora Neale Hurston (1950), to Vine Deloria Jr. (1988), to Faye Harrison (1997), to Audra Simpson (2014), to Ryan Jobson (2020). Alongside this shining genealogy, and recent offerings within the emerging field of disability anthropology (Block et al. 2015; Block 2020; Hartblay 2020; Rogers 2020), when I grapple with the question of what ethical research praxis might be, I return to my conversation with A.

I consider the way crip life and crip time and crip politics infused her responses to my research protocols. The way crip accountability became a new measure, questioning a model of reciprocity valued because it was scarce within a domain of academic prestige anchored in mastery—a project whose racism, colonialism, and patriarchy have been generatively indicted (Singh 2018), but whose ableism still remains largely unnamed beyond explicitly crip critique.

When I think, as a feminist scholar, of what ethical research praxis might look like, I think of A's invitation, her lesson in yielding, that was also a reminder of standpoint theory's crucial linking of positionality and epistemology—the insight that we always know *from* somewhere (Harding 1986)—as her invitation surfaced the internalized ableism rooted in the reaction formation of my queerness that shaped my heroic gesture toward what I hoped was equity in a mode of research I knew to be irreducibly extractive.

The lessons here are not mine to give, they are mine to learn.

NOTE

- 1 In her ethnography of the political life of the Kahnawà:ke Mohawk polity, Audra Simpson elaborates the Kahanawà:ke refusal to take what supposedly good things are offered by the state (such as U.S. or Canadian passports) and allied forms of authoritative knowledge, such as anthropological categories of cultural difference and forms of multicultural “recognition,” which ultimately discipline difference and undermine the political and epistemological sovereignty of those who are being made subjects (but not authors) of knowledge or “recognition.” In her account, refusal, particularly the refusal of things that seem good from the perspective of the liberalism of settler states, becomes an ethical and political act. Her thinking about refusal from her particular location within Kahnawà:ke enactments of sovereignty has informed a broader way of thinking about the politics and ethics of refusal in other sites (See McGranahan 2016).

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