Practice-Based Research: Working in Crip Time

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I am two days away from the extended deadline I have negotiated for this submission, and I am seemingly decades away from finishing. I've been writing steadily, but not without massive fits and starts.

I just want a vacation.

I had been left burned out by energy and time spent trying to assist flailing college students in 2022, the third year of the COVID pandemic, when our administration pressed us to "get back to normal" while students rotated in and out of quarantines and I had to cancel live performances of the production I was directing. I find myself railing with Maureen Connolly and Tom Craig that "it is unconscionable, given what we know about ergonomics, the relationship between environment and disease, and the neurophysiological basis of cognition, that educational institutions continue to design structures, schedules, and curricula as if the actual body did not exist" (2005, 252).

> *Sitting in front of my large screen monitor on an uncomfortable office chair for the sixth straight hour, it is clear to me that my body exists. My therapist asks why I don't find a location more conducive to associating pleasure with the act of writing. I tell them this is the only place I have access to a monitor that allows me to enlarge my text so I can actually read what I write. As an overzealous editor of shitty first drafts, I wonder if maybe this is part of my problem and relocate to my porch swing with my laptop. Fits and starts.*

Every burst of writing and research raises more questions than it seems to answer. Last night, I came up with yet another key research question that would ideally require me to start from scratch. Again. I am out of time and if I want to publish this article, I need to live with the research I have completed to this point and finish my writing so that it can be sent off to editors and then reviewers. While these scholars will help me further hone my argument and offer additional perspectives, this process ends before the work is published and reaches its audience. Once in print, idea development happens without the ability for development with a collaborative audience.

> *My mind drifts to the dear friend and collaborator I lost to cancer in October. She was deeply embedded in all stages of this research project, from Friday writing / sharing / happy hour sessions to feedback on rough drafts and performances to working to fight for accessibility on campus. The sensation of loss sets me reeling. I stare at my screen trying to understand why I am blocked. Is it because writing about the project without her feels like betrayal? Am I stuck because I still haven't carved out time to mourn her loss and begin the process of healing? Am I incapable of generating insights on my own? I go grab a scarf of hers I inherited and put it on, imagining her hugging me and then try to refocus. Fits.*

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The material realities of writing, editing, and printing work require deadlines, deadlines set to a colonialist clock created in very different circumstances for different types of scholars, generally scholars from privileged backgrounds.[1] Though I also have a hard upcoming deadline for a livestream performance of "Awaiting Tiresias," I know that performance will be followed by others in an ongoing cycle of writing, rehearsal, performance, discussion, self-reflection, rewriting: a cycle of revision with indeterminate conclusion. This cycle has repeated intermittently over the past four years, and every time I think I am ready to put it behind me, the moment tells me otherwise. While any individual performance date provides a firm deadline for the version of the work as shared with an audience, that version of the research is always already incomplete. It has no shape of its own and leaves no rigid / tangible residue. Instead, the research questions evolve simultaneously with the input of my live audience—research transformed in real time. In other words, "Awaiting Tiresias" moves on crip time.

In her groundbreaking book *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, Alison Kafer defines crip time as "flex time not just expanded but exploded" (2013, 27). Crip time explodes time, and the space cleared by this explosion provides fertile ground for practice-based research—research that happens in the body and in community. Crip time reimagines "notions of what can and should happen in time" and "recogniz[es] how expectations of 'how long things take' are based on very particular minds and bodies. . . . Rather than bend[ing] disabled bodies and minds to meet the clock, crip time bends the clock to meet disabled bodies and minds" (27). Crip time acknowledges the real, embodied experience of the individual in relationship to their society to ensure the scholar is not sacrificed at the altar of their scholarship. I suspect nearly everyone working in higher ed today relates to Elisabeth Griffiths's observation that "it is often assumed that the 'willing, capable and able' worker can perform to an excellent standard in everything all of the time, but this creates a highly pressurised working environment and this frenetic pace of activity has somehow become normalised" (2020, 125). Furthermore, this frenetic pace frequently breaks down the health and immune systems of those working in higher ed, knocking already disabled scholars out of the profession altogether and disabling others who were previously among the "willing, capable and able."

> *Fits and starts engender new fits. In the five years since I was diagnosed with vision impairment, I have accumulated hundreds of emails regarding my needed accommodations. Most remain unmet, and those that were met initially are generally lost anew in the endless cycle of campus staff comings and goings, the development of new software, and lost paperwork. This exhausting cycle of self-advocacy, ongoing disclosure, and lost ground has stolen my time, my enthusiasm, and set back my hopes of learning new technology that would make research and writing easier.*

Alice Andrews imagines a crip intervention in neoliberal research practices, "the autoimmune self-destruction of the contemporary university might be reconfigured as the self destruction of the immune system that protects the neoliberal, racist, ableist and individualist university, with the aim of opening in its place a system of protection, interdependency and mutuality that might take care of all forms of suffering" (2020, 105). In their call for proposals for this special issue, editors Peter Dickinson and Ellen Waterman defined "the underlying proposition of the various methodologies" they classify as practice-based research as belief "that creative practices may be used to seek out knowledge while also challenging the epistemological assumptions that produce the concept 'research'" (sent through the ASTR listserv). Nisha Sajnani defines practice-based research as "involv[ing] individual or collaborative reflection and inquiry in an effort to improve upon a

particular practice" (Sajnani, Sallis, and Salvatore 2019, 78). Through its commitment to challenging assumptions and collaborative research methods, practice-based research meets Andrews's call for crip intervention and is a powerful crip methodology.

Crip scholarship recognizes the humanity of the person engaged in doing research as well as the scholar's interdependence upon various communities: research specialists with shared interests, campus, local, familial. Crip scholarship prioritizes the health of those who engage in it and the transformations that occur through the research and dissemination process instead of results.

> *I wonder when or if the book chapter I wrote about performative authoethnography as a disability research method will be published. Submitted in October 2021, notification about acceptance was moved from December to March then July 2022 and now to sometime later this year. I suspect that the lived experience of crip time by those involved in this project is part of the renegotiated timeline. I'm grateful that this delay did not negatively impact my promotion to Full last year. It could have been otherwise.*

Recognition of the researcher as human challenges traditional models that imagine the researcher as an enlightened mind who engages in careful layers of study in order to uncover a Truth worthy of sharing with the world: "a post-positivist paradigm . . . that tells [us] that knowledge is finite, knowable, observable and measurable and that there is a truth, 'capital T'" (Sajnani, Sallis, and Salvatore 2019, 88). This paradigm places value upon individual "discoveries" and scholarship. As one example, though far from universally true, promotion and tenure guidelines often privilege solo scholarship over that shared by multiple authors. In traditional academic structures, "the organisational framework . . . is not conducive to knowledge production in the spirit of solidarity and collaboration. The excellence framework is devoid of incentives for knowledge based in social realities for the simple reason that it is not produced fast enough to be published in the highest-ranking journals and for a university to maintain its position on prestigious ranking lists" (Gilbert 2020, 25). For theatre scholars and practitioners, these pressures manifest in things like institutional requirements to publish traditional research about practice-based research before the work can fully qualify towards tenure and promotion.[2]

Although institutions of higher education often articulate themselves as "families" with deeply connected communities, the work they prioritize and celebrate is that which can be easily quantified and evaluated based upon previously established standards.[3] On the other hand, disabled communities have developed intricate mutual aid networks in response to structures that systematically develop policies and procedures that exclude them. These mutual aid practices use lived experience and dialogue to determine communal needs and the best ways to meet them. As a form of crip research, mutual aid provides a powerful model for practice-based research: ignore pressures to quantify and medicalize that impede the researcher's ability to speak directly with and to real communities through "polyvocality, emergence, and contingent knowledge that is socially provocative" (Sajnani, Sallis, and Salvatore 2019, 88).

"Awaiting Tiresias" as Crip Scholarship

> *I'm distracted by a sherbet orange dawn on the lake during my morning run, contemplating where the best place will be to catch it in a photo. I weaned myself from competitive distance running by stopping to take photographs of things during my runs. It's a habit I don't intend to abandon even*

though I can no longer remember the last time I was registered for a race as an elite athlete. I'm thrown into the air and land on my hands and knees. Only when I hit the ground do I register the knee-high boulders that mark the entrance to the state park. I run past them every morning, yet this morning I never even saw them coming. I will feel their impact for the rest of my life.

As a disabled scholar, I find myself profoundly frustrated by a traditional model of scholarship that asks me to imagine my knowledge as removed from the body (politic and individual) that shapes it. After all, my bodily experience of the world changes constantly depending on my immediate circumstances and this, in turn, transforms my relationship to my work. On particular types of overcast days, my vision is obscured in shades of grey, blurring things together and leaving me to grope my way through the fog. On bright morning runs, sunlight turns everything painfully white, stopping me in my tracks as I listen closely for traffic in the hopes of avoiding running straight into an oncoming car. These changes impact me physically, but they also change the pace of my thoughts, the depth of attention I have available to give to my world. Reading in a library with white walls and fluorescent lights gives me a headache in short order, limiting the time I can devote to research—and that's when I'm lucky enough to find a book printed in a font large enough for me to read. The literally painful association between research and my body, in turn, pushes me to contemplate both my work and my relationship to scholarship and the field. It is impossible for me to ignore my body as I work.

I reread the submission guidelines, noticing for the first time that I will need to extract anything that could identify me in my scholarship before I submit this piece for "blind" peer review. I'm distracted by blindness. In so many vision metaphors, blindness is used when we really mean willful ignorance. In this case, willful ignorance is conflated with objectivity—a belief that scholars can and should judge work on the strength of ideas severed from the individuals who created them.[4] Objective ableism. I can imagine no way to remove the body from the knowledge.

My mind jumps from blindness as objectivity to a feel-good article a friend shared a while back. The article was about a family with a blind child given a pair of specialty glasses that allowed her to see for the first time. According to the article, these glasses finally allowed the toddler to identify her mother, as if this child did not already recognize her mother by using other senses such as hearing (Veljanocski 2021). Blind peer review assumes that reviewers do not engage knowledge such as contextual clues to make assumptions about the identity of the author—either in specific, or in terms of assumed identity group.

My body brought me to performative autoethnography, to practice-based research.

Shortly after I upended my world by running into that boulder, I was diagnosed with a genetic disorder that causes significant vision loss and will likely lead to blindness. As with many diagnoses, this information named what was happening to me, but it did not provide clarity about my future.[5] Isolated from other vision-impaired scholars and theatre artists, I embarked upon practice-based research to better understand my prospects in fields that define themselves primarily in terms of vision and sight. This form of research felt especially useful given that I was early in the stages of learning about vision impairment, far from the depth I would need to publish traditional scholarship. Contrary to the expectations of my institution, I did not yet understand the full scale of my disability, much less have the knowledge I needed to advocate for specific accommodations and

alterations to the way I traditionally worked. I wanted to deeply investigate my own relationship to the theatre, higher education, and disability culture writ large.

Initially my questions were mostly framed in terms of acceptance and capability. My own immersion in ableist culture made me question whether I would have the skills to continue working as a successful director and professor when I was unable to see. I was also concerned about acceptance as a theatre artist, professor, and scholar by students and colleagues who knew I was going blind. Nearly all the training I received as a theatre director was grounded in visual components: blocking / stage pictures, eye contact, and other forms of visual storytelling and community building. I studied "visionary" stage directors like Robert Wilson, Anne Bogart, and Bertolt Brecht. The only blind models I had in the theatre were fictional characters like Tiresias, Pozzo, and Gloucester, none of whom inspired great confidence.

My first explorations of my changing circumstances were short self-reflexive performance sketches inspired by my diagnosis. While a student at La MaMa Umbria's International Directors Symposium, I zipped myself into a piece of my "baggage" and filmed a frantic phone call from inside a suitcase where I pleaded to be found. (Given the ninety-degree day on which we filmed, this piece did not require a great deal of acting.) I also performed a short segment about blindness from *Oedipus Rex*'s Tiresias while tucked under a sheet and the scrutiny of the twenty peers who I crammed around my literal bed. A few months later at Pig Iron Theatre Company's Something for Nothing workshop, a photograph of a bull skeleton in the desert inspired me to create a stumbling, falling character who begged others not to look at or help him.

> *We are in an acting workshop doing trust exercises based upon shared body weight and pushing the limits of safety. We are sweaty and slippery and I am supposed to catch you as our weight shifts dramatically and suddenly. We've blocked it that I am to go from your shoulders to catching you by your ankle. Slow motion, everything is fine. It's go time. We move faster now, adrenaline and exhaustion urging us to get through the routine as quickly as possible. I cannot see your ankle. You take yourself out of the exercise to catch yourself before I can drop you . . . and I am left feeling inept and dangerous. The next time we engage in a trust exercise I opt out.*

My early pieces placed me under the scrutiny of those who watched them—and by extension the larger culture from whence those audiences came. Because I did not spend a great deal of time with the disabled community, I imagined my audience to be abled and I constructed pieces that reflected this worldview. Although these creations did not deeply interrogate my relationship with my society, they did make legible pieces of my identity that are otherwise invisible and largely unacknowledged.[6] While I came at the work from an abled perspective, my performance served to bring my "body into the conversation," and refused to "divid[e my] experiences into public and private spheres," moving instead "towards integrated forms of knowing" (Sajnani, Sallis, and Salvatore 2019, 93).

There was a rebellious component of my work to claim disability—which US culture prefers to confine to the private realm—in public spaces that nearly always encourage people to hide it.[7] Both academe and the theatre are ableist institutions. For example, a study of contracts issued with the professional actors' union between 2016 and 2019 notes that only 3.46 percent went to actors or stage managers with disabilities (Actors' Equity Association 2020, 9). To the best of my knowledge, no data has been collected on the number of directors, designers, or other theatre professionals with disabilities. A 2021 article on disabled faculty notes that the most recent data from 2004 shows only

4 percent of faculty members in the United States have reported disabilities, as compared with 27 percent of the general public (Burke 2021). This data is unsurprising given that "much of what people experience around disability in academia is hidden for fear of stigma and the perception of not being able to 'keep up'" (Griffiths 2020, 126).

While traditional disability studies scholarship brings disabled people into the consciousness of those who read it, it cannot physically challenge the homogeneously abled composition of the community in which it is consumed. Performances, however, place the disruptive disabled person in the midst of a primarily abled space. As I discovered in conversations with audiences following my early informal showings of solo pieces, however, my embodiment reinscribed ableist attitudes of revulsion and pity. Audiences described things like having an impulse to come onto the stage space to help me get up when my bull stumbled and fell. They remained seated due to both theatrical conventions of audience passivity and the fact that they resonated with the shame my character expressed when he begged them not to help. They accepted my shame without questioning the society that created it. At that stage in my personal journey their pity validated me, which was sufficient for me at the time.

I never intended to continue to use performance as research, because I was unaware that my explorations were engaged in this work. After all, they largely came out of assignments given to me when I was studying various directing and devising approaches at professional workshops. I turned to the material because it was top of mind, not because I consciously wanted to study the relationship between disability and theatre. When a friend encouraged me to propose a short solo performance for a panel she was organizing for the American Society for Theatre Research (ASTR) conference, however, I made the conscious decision to use autoethnographic performance to explore my sense of isolation from the institutions in which I worked.

> *I'm in a faculty reading group to discuss Eli Clare's* Brilliant Imperfection. *For the first time in my life, I recognize that there are alternatives to cure and the power of acceptance. I decline my ophthalmologist's offer for genetic testing to determine if I have a variant for which they are close to finding a cure. When I return a year later, I agree. The results shake me. I'm not close to a cure but my genetics show me to be likely to face losses beyond my vision. I question the value of this knowledge and set it aside.[8]*

Still deeply embedded in an ableist mindset, my proposal for ASTR was titled "Fumbling around in the Dark." While it contained a reference to Tiresias, something I have kept in all iterations of this research, the rest of the short proposal was devoted to the following:

> [I am] a director who stands "visionary" at the edge of my vision. A lifetime of crafting images from the dark and teaching others how to paint evocative stage pictures appears to have left me without insight. I scour textbooks for answers to the question of how one directs without sight—but either those words aren't there or they've scurried out of eye's range.
>
> This performance art piece wonders…
>
> Why is darkness full of fear?

As I began developing what turned into a performative lecture entitled "Rearranging the Furniture," I realized that I wanted to challenge this negative association with blindness.[9] Coming to terms with my diagnosis, I recognized that darkness is frightening but also carries potential. I wanted to demonstrate for myself and for audiences the possibility that darkness is more than a void—that it can be defined and explored.[10] Answering Alice Andrews's call to mobilize "crip knowledges" to create "a system of protection, interdependency and mutuality" (2020, 105), I strove to find a way to use the performance to emphasize the concept of interdependence in community. Fears of being dependent upon others or of being isolated as a blind person are the reason that blindness was named as the top fear for Americans in a 2016 survey (Preidt 2016). I hoped to challenge ableist narratives about inspiring people who individually "overcome" their disabilities with the crip understanding that we survive disability by developing and relying on community. While our structures and institutions disable us, we learn how to survive them from those who have already done so.

Given that this initial performance would likely happen in a conference room with limited control over lighting, I decided to create darkness and interdependence by asking audience members to blindfold themselves. This allowed me to navigate the space around them as a means of encouraging the engagement of other senses. As soon as I had a draft of a script and long before I had anything resembling an embodied performance, I invited an audience of primarily non-theatre colleagues to the studio to help me edit. My first attempt to demonstrate an interdependent community was to tie myself up in strings. I intended to place the other end of these strings in the hands of blindfolded audience members when they raised their hands to acknowledge a shared experience with something I described. I imagined this connection as a means of tethering us to each other. The attempt was an abject failure. My yarn became a tangled mess within seconds and while I might have tried to find a better mechanism for the tethering, an audience member noted that they were so stressed by being asked to hold something for me and not wanting to fail that they didn't hear anything else I said during the performance. In other words, I had become a literal embodiment of Tami Spry's depiction of performative autoethnography as a place where "we may sometimes lurch within the boundaries of performance only to stumble upon a shard of language telling the messy beauty of being with others" (2011, 27). I replaced the string with a less metaphorical exploration of interdependence by engaging the audience in communal activities such as: brainstorming common vision-centred language like "turning a blind eye," singing "three blind mice," and standing up and stretching together.

> *My head hurts and I'm having a hot flash. I'm hours away from my deadline and still not close to finishing a first draft. I've been sitting at my desk for the past five hours, stopping only to go lie on the hardwood floor in front of the fan when the sweat starts to run down my back. I contemplate the irony of working myself to exhaustion on a paper about the value of not working ourselves to exhaustion. I write an e-mail asking for a few more days, shut down my computer, and shuffle off to bed.*

The core of "Rearranging the Furniture" was an attempt to transport my audience to an experience I had while waiting on my diagnosis: a fifteen-minute test that required me to sit locked in a closet-sized room, in the dark, wearing a blindfold, with a stranger. This experience came at the end of a four-hour appointment full of bright lights and other mechanisms that strained my eyes, my patience, and my sense of time. It was disorienting and a perfect example of the way "disability and illness have the power to extract us from linear, progressive time with its normative life stages and

cast us into a wormhole of backward and forward acceleration, jerky stops and starts, tedious intervals and abrupt endings" (Samuels 2017). I was drawn to the timeless crip space of the exam room for its liminality (while I sat in the dark, I was between sighted and blind), and I hoped the space would evoke the power, fear, and potentiality of darkness in my audience. My narrative followed crip logic, meandering back and forth (direct dialogue in the present with the audience, the exam room two years earlier, a student ten years in the past, etc.), crossing numerous places (exam room, Maui, theatre classrooms), and exploring a variety of topics that seemed to follow stream of consciousness (ableism in academia and theatre, inaccessible physical structures, blindness, interdependence).

After multiple rehearsals and revisions in front of invited audiences, I took the piece to ASTR.[11] Responses were generally positive, most especially in terms of the lively discussion we had afterward about ways to make our spaces and practices more inclusive and accessible. People also noted that the blindfold helped them attend to their own perspectives on the described experiences rather than relying on what they saw me portray. At the same time, other members found it impossible not to worry about how they were being perceived by people who could watch them, were distracted by trying to place my location in space, or fretted about what might happen to them during the performance. Most distressingly for me, two members of the audience shared stories with me about family members or friends who had confided that if they were ever told they were going blind, they would commit suicide. While those audience members told me they wished they had been able to share the performance with those loved ones to provide a different perspective, I worried that the decision to blindfold the audience reinforced an association between darkness and fear.

Indeed, blindfolding the audience without providing a meaningful empowering embodied experience of blindness simply reinscribed concepts of blind people as lacking access to the world. A number of studies over the past two decades have demonstrated that what are known as disability simulation exercises "fail to account for the diverse coping mechanisms acquired from living long-term with disability" and instead reinforce "an ableist perspective that emphasizes loss and limitation rather than the lived experience in an often-discriminatory world" (Nario-Redmond, Gospodinov, and Cobb 2017, 327). Given that I located my audience in the precise moments in which I faced my own perceived loss of ability, this consequence should have been apparent to me when I created the piece. It took an embodied experience with an audience, however, to help me understand that abled audiences know only the moment of loss and not the lifetime of adaptation.[12] I learned through processing this research with others that "Simply gathering, assembling, and staging stories may reproduce institutional colonisations of voice and re-assert norms and conventions which become embedded in particular circumstances if care is not given to how scenes are organised, presented or received." (Raynor 2019, 695). Although I made thoughtful intentional decisions about all performative and textual choices and paid careful attention to the ways I brought audience members into the crip space of the play, I needed to witness audience response to my performance to understand that some of my decisions reinscribed institutional conventions I was trying to challenge.

When I received word that "Rearranging the Furniture" would be part of PortFringe in 2019, I decided it would be wise to revise the piece to work harder to counter negative associations with blindness by including blindfolded creative engagement that would demonstrate that coping and beauty are possible without sight. While I daydreamed about large-scale communal sculpture or the creation of soundscapes, the reality of having to transport all materials in the trunk of a car and knowledge that the fringe festival would allow just one brief technical rehearsal and sparse

technology convinced me to scale down. I drew upon my crip theatre knowledge to assess the resources I would have and to plan for a variety of circumstances, deciding to place small canisters of play doh under each seat. At one point during the performance, I invited the audience to stand up from their chairs, stretch, and then sit down and open the container under their seats. I guided them through a tactile exploration of the sculpture made by a previous audience member in an attempt to reinforce that we are able to perceive shapes, create images, and have emotional responses to things without using our eyes. Then I asked them to remold the object into their own sculpture while I talked. Audiences were never encouraged to look at their creations. As reviewers of the performance at PortFringe noted, this was "a tactile experience that reveal[ed], ever so briefly, different ways of engaging with performance" (Weldon 2019) to let the audience "use artifacts from people who sat where we did before" and recognize they were "people who were okay after the experience" (M 2019).

> *I am blindfolded in front of an audience of disabled artists telling my story about hiking the Haleakala crater. I am lost in the narrative, caught up in the glorious underscoring of improvised sounds they are making to score my stumbles through the rocky terrain. Aware of the beauty and chaos in disabled adventures, we find joy in simply indulging the experience as it happens in that one moment. I perform almost nothing I had planned and exit the stage, breathless and laughing.[13]*

I left PortFringe hungry to explore in-depth and evocative collaborative audience creativity in nonvisual mediums. A short residency and collaboration with fellow artists at Indy Convergence inspired a number of possibilities: using body mics to create an auditory experience of the space as I navigated it; tethering audience members to each other and asking them to engage in tasks such as sculpting or shifting locations; and allowing audiences to shift around furniture on the set before I entered the space. I was excited to research these ideas in a rehearsal space to discover where they might lead in shaping additional performances. I was fortunate enough to be heading into a sabbatical—the one moment in higher education that follows crip time to encourage innovation.[14] Joe Norris, Lynn Fels, and Yasmine Kandil describe innovation as "about finding what gems there are rather than determining success by predetermined outcomes. To be innovative in research one must surrender to the quest, the (quest)ion, often being lost, and risk capsizing" (2019, 102). While fearful of capsizing and injuring people in the process (especially if I encouraged them to move furniture or to move themselves through the dark), I was excited to surrender.

I lined up a residency to spend a month at Eastern Michigan University (EMU) in late spring to experiment with technology a friend and colleague had acquired to make their productions more accessible to audiences. In the first months of sabbatical, I cripped time to spend it in the way that felt most productive and healthy for me: I ran in the morning and then met my dear friend and fellow disabled faculty member (also on leave) in the afternoon. We spent those sessions reading disability theory and history, sharing what we learned, and writing new work when the spirit moved us. I finished a shitty first draft of a full-length performance piece and presented it to an invited group to get feedback before I took it to EMU to rework. The response was lacklustre, and I was decidedly "lost" in my research. I learned the person I planned to collaborate with at EMU was leaving and we began to pare down expectations to find things we could explore in a one-week residency instead. I continued my daily research routine, finding footing in expanding my knowledge of disability studies and trusted that at some point, a new direction would present itself to me.

We sit in a corner of the bar after a successful week's work, revelling in the way that liberating ourselves from productivity pressures has led to richer work. We toast the community we feel together and feel inspired to write a proposal for a grant to work with faculty at other liberal arts colleges to develop what we are calling Universal Design for Faculty. We plan to "apply the core UDL principles of flexibility in engagement; reduction of barriers to research, teaching, and service; and the provision of appropriate accommodations and supports for our essential work as faculty members." We find the names of colleagues at other schools who previously led successful grants on UDL and bring them into our planning sessions. They inform us that the granting organization is "structurally conservative" and encourage us to use justice language sparingly, replacing it with individual, rather than structural, transformation. Deflated, we discuss whether we are willing to abandon structural critique.

It is March 2020. Over the next three months, all plans for the year are cancelled.

I have to reboot. As a disabled theatre artist, I am well prepared for this moment. As I tell my students, theatre teaches us how to assess our circumstances and resources, consider our intended audiences and goals, and make decisions that best use our resources to meet our goals. Given that no theatre process unfolds exactly as planned, successful theatre practitioners are skilled at adjusting calmly in the moment to challenges and existential threats. Disabled people are also accustomed to adjusting in the moment to changing circumstances, both internal and external, as we navigate an ableist society and a constantly shifting internal landscape. "The apprehension of disability forces individuals to come to grips with the way the body changes and can change further without warning, betraying the self's conception of who and what one is" (Hirschmann 2015, 208). As disabled people, our understanding of our world and ourselves is constantly changing, and we are prepared to remake ourselves in an instant.

In the earliest moments of COVID, everything locked down in response to a dangerous and easily transmitted airborne virus. People were told to avoid shared contact of items and spaces, to stay at least six feet apart, and to wear masks. My dream of spending sabbatical investigating physical interdependency, sensory indulgence, and closely intimate creative collaboration in dark spaces became a nightmare. If I hoped to be able to perform my piece, it would need to utilize film and/or streaming technologies, where I could be in one space and my audiences in another. Recognizing that the camera allows for greater control over what people see and hear, and that it is particularly adept at rendering interior spaces, I decided to return to the exam room as a central location to explore the relationship between the thoughts in my head and the ways my body/mind navigates its world. This time, instead of blindfolds, I hoped to utilize film itself to place audiences in the darkness with me. Whereas "Rearranging the Furniture" plunged audiences into relatively total blindness via blindfolding, "Awaiting Tiresias" allows them to exist simultaneously in the (generally) sighted world in which they watch the film (often at home) and in the sightless world in which I exist via the screen. Like me, audiences are in a crip liminal state.

Because the first performance of this piece was scheduled to be for the American Society of Bioethics and the Humanities (ASBH) conference, which moved online due to the pandemic, we shot from the perspective of the technician who shared the room with me. The audience, therefore, attended the performance from the position of medical professional. My goal shifted to "represent the complexity of the body's critical expression of interacting with others in the frames of social norms and expectations, and then write the body's transformation of those norms" (Spry 2011, 100).

In other words, I wanted to draw attention to the challenges that my disabled genderqueer body poses in a medical space and encourage medical professionals to change the norms in their practices. The performance followed crip logic, shifting fluidly between naturalistic dialogue between myself and the offscreen voice of the medical technician observing me (visually represented by live imagery of me sitting uncomfortably blindfolded in a chair) and monologues of internalized thoughts during periods of time in which I am waiting in darkness for the exam to finish (visually represented by prerecorded dark watery rippling motions over tiny fragments of light or other unidentifiable objects). The latter segments are underscored by sparse musical accompaniment.[15] In order to maintain the sense of being trapped under a medical gaze in an exam room, I removed the interactive segments with the audience from "Rearranging the Furniture" (such as brainstorming vision phrases) and scripted them into conversation with the technician.

Nearly all other textual elements were new to this piece, and they drew upon the research I was reading during my sabbatical. They also incorporated immediate issues such as the withholding of ventilators from disabled people during COVID. Given the nature of the form, audience interaction became limited to post-performance dialogue. Although most performances since ASBH have been for audiences outside of the medical profession, I have kept the framing from the perspective of the technician for all of them. I am still studying the efficacy of this decision. I would prefer to film the full piece from my perspective, showing the disjointed and fragmented images that I received during that medical examination. Such a choice would maintain my position as authority on my experience and provide a way for me to scrutinize the medical field that (often callously) determines the fate of disabled people. It would also help me avoid being subject to the medicalizing gaze, a gaze that takes agency away from those it observes. Rosemarie Garland Thompson compares the male gaze to the medical stare, noting, "The male gaze produces female subjects; the normative stare constructs the disabled. While both are forms of visual marking, gazing trades on a sexual register and staring traffics in medical discourse. Both visual exchanges prompt narrative. Gazing says, 'You are mine.' Staring says, 'What is wrong with you?' Gazers become men by looking at women, and starers become doctors by visually probing people with disabilities" (2005, 32).

Training the camera on me feels natural to audiences due both to film traditions, which show protagonists on screen even when telling a first-person story, and to ableist behaviours that scrutinize disabled bodies. While I would like to challenge this perspective, I do not have access to any medical spaces for the purposes of livestreaming performances. Furthermore, placing me in a liminal dark room is an accurate reflection of my experience, but it would not be accurate for the medical technician. He went into the space as a (presumably) able-bodied white male technician with knowledge and authority and his status was never challenged.[16]

> *Conversations with medical students following a performance lead them to ask me if I ever tell my doctors that they are misgendering me when they call me "miss." I don't. It doesn't feel worth it. They tell me they wish their patients would tell them so they could be accurate in how they address their patients. I update my pronouns in my online medical portal. The next time I see my everyday ophthalmologist, he tells me he can't do anything for me, even though the last time I was in he had suggested a tweak in my prescription. My general practitioner also suddenly treats me as if I am a nuisance. Is it coincidence or my pronouns? Should I change them back?*

While I haven't been able to find a way to film my livestream performances of "Awaiting Tiresias" from first-person perspective, I took what I learned in those iterations of the research and created a

film version shot entirely from my perspective by using a GoPro mounted to my head.[17] The segments in the exam room are similar to those in the livestream, with the voice of an offscreen technician, but instead of shifting to their perspective of me, we remain in the murky watery darkness. We have more control over sound in the film and are able to change the quality of the room through reverb and other processing in order to further distinguish between what is in my head and what is happening live with the technician.

The film allows me to counter audience tendencies to pity my disabled experience by beginning and ending the film running on my favourite trail in the summer. It is lush green and lined with flowers. I used film editing software to create shadows in the periphery of the field of vision. The shadows extend further into the frame in the closing segment than in the opening, but whereas I fall hard in the first moments of the film, I run with joy and unscathed at the end. I am accompanied in the last segment by a man on a bike, and this image of us working together is an attempt to provide audiences with an example of interdependent joy and community. I am not the only person who benefits from this companionship. I neither "overcome" my disability nor am I gutted by it. I exist in the moments long after diagnosis, long after the initial shock of perceived loss, as someone who has developed coping mechanisms and community. The film ends after I photograph a flower and the man on a bike asks if it smells good. My answer goes unrecorded. In my crip world, there are no final answers, just curiosity and exploration.

Awaiting Tiresias is designed to follow crip time and to incorporate crip methodologies. To ensure the film is as accessible as possible, it embeds both captions and audio description (AD) into the design. While most audiences are familiar with captioning by now, familiarity with audio description is much rarer.[18] Given that it needs to be turned on or accessed via specialized equipment, most sighted audiences have no experience with AD and are unsure how to place it within the context of a production. For example, an outside reviewer of my production of *Tone a Blind Eye*, interpreted the AD as "voice over 'stage direction' type narration," which they assessed to be a "Brechtian alienation technique to keep the audience distanced from the story" and a "distraction" (Anonymous 2021).[19] Because *Awaiting Tiresias* is largely set in darkness with an emphasis on careful listening to stream-of-consciousness thought, it further challenges the overwhelmingly visual focus of the medium. It moves slowly, methodically, with minimal action and no seeming conflict beyond my internal struggle to understand my identity in the context of a gendered, ableist society.

Although I committed to creating a crip experience for audiences of the film, the process of making it adhered closely to rigid scholarship traditions. Because I served as producer, screenwriter, lead performer, director, cinematographer, film editor, audio description author, and captioner, I controlled the timing of the production process. I was, therefore, able to work at a speed that matched my knowledge base, other demands on my time and attention, and my mental and physical capabilities. Since I had no previous knowledge of filmmaking, one of the earliest parts of the process that I felt confident undertaking was performing the dialogue. I had one day in the studio with the actor playing the technician and recording my monologues. This happened well before I began my livestream performances and the process of iterative practice-based refinement. That process led me to discover changes I wanted to make to the script. While I was able to rerecord the monologues, I was unable to bring the actor back for another round of edits to the technician. Furthermore, over the course of the year that it took me to collaborate with my sound designer and teach myself how to edit film, I discovered additional changes to the script and film that I wanted to make. Each one of those would have caused a string of additional revisions that would have been

time consuming and possibly ruined the film.[20] At some point, I simply had to accept that the scholarship would not reflect my most current thinking about the project.

Conclusion

> For *crip time is broken time*. It requires us to break in our bodies and minds to new rhythms, new patterns of thinking and feeling and moving through the world. It forces us to take breaks, even when we don't want to, even when we want to keep going, to move ahead. It insists that we listen to our bodyminds *so* closely, *so* attentively, in a culture that tells us to divide the two and push the body away from us while also pushing it beyond its limits. Crip time means listening to the broken languages of our bodies, translating them, honoring their words. (Samuels 2017)

Both crip time and practice-based research require us to break traditional patterns of being and thinking, to "critique conventional understandings" of research and scholarship, as Peter Dickinson and Ellen Waterman wrote in the call for proposals for this special issue. Disabled scholars have much to teach us in terms of learning how to listen to "the broken languages of our bodies" in order to create crip spaces and times for new ways of working. Theatre scholars are capable of translating these broken languages of our bodies. Our profession teaches us the value of listening deeply and transforming people and processes. We play games to build community. We imagine new worlds and use the material of the world we inhabit to create new ways of living onstage. We translate words on a page into embodied experiences that we share with audiences. We listen to audience energy and change the pacing of a production to allow us all to breathe together. We are the perfect emissaries to crip the future, but it will not be easy.

As with my own process of creating the film version of *Awaiting Tiresias*, theatre in the academy denies crip methodologies. Our work is structured by the timing of the academic calendar, and we schedule our rehearsal processes down to the moment to make the most of the time we have, assuming we will be able to hold ourselves and our collaborators to those deadlines. We base our processes on abled artists and our products on abled audiences, denying the broken languages of those who might teach us new ways of working. We are evaluated at our institutions on the basis of rigid accomplishments and quantifiable data like numbers of citations. We understandably sacrifice the iterative process of learning through meandering to earn job security.

Transforming this process will require us to embrace crip methodologies and shed deeply embedded ableist ideas about productivity and value. We will have to fight for new standards, and those of us with institutional power need to do much of this labour. The acknowledged experts in the field upon whom we rely for validation frequently achieve their positions because they believe in old models. Like my own, many institutions rely on professors of theatre at other institutions to evaluate the quality and importance of our work as part of the process for going up for tenure and promotion. These professionals are valued for their expertise, but much of this expertise was gained working for traditional institutions and in traditional methodologies. Scholars and artists who engage in crip scholarship often find themselves at odds with these standards. For example, while the reviewers recruited by PortFringe from non-academic circles were able to understand the crip structure and goals of "Rearranging the Furniture," the academic external evaluator critiqued it for lacking in theatricality and a narrative that "introduced a lot of ideas and tried to stitch them together, resulting in a hodgepodge narrative that the audience is left to puzzle out." While they were able to discern

that it was an intentional "metaphor or analogy for how the world is all jumbled as one struggles to keep from unravelling while facing a debilitating diagnosis or illness," they ultimately condemned the performance as merely a "serviceable presentation" in need of the "aid of a good dramaturg" (Anonymous 2019). Similarly, specialists in their disciplines are trained to expect particular conventions and are frequently disinclined towards those who break them. The Rochester International Film Festival rejected *Awaiting Tiresias* for being too long at twenty-three minutes, "particularly the middle section where the audience is only looking at the dark world of a visually impaired person. Film is such a visual medium. Our concern is that the audience will tire of the film even though the topic is a worthy one" (Shellenberger 2021). I tire of these gatekeepers. Yet as Alice Andrews illuminates, "Cripistemologies . . . are *already* at work in the university and should we come to centre these, perhaps we might find with and within the autoimmune moment potential for *sustainable* transformative work to take place on both local and potentially more global scales" (2020, 119). Practice-based research is one way that we can encourage sustainable transformation to our field.

Notes

1. Some of those circumstances include: a professoriate primarily populated by white men with partners who did domestic labour, freeing them up to focus on research; a lack of email; minimal expectations for technological innovation; graduate school training that ensured a foundation in the subject matter and colonized curriculum they were likely to teach; etc.

2. As is obvious from the title of her foreword to *Drama Research Methods*, Anne M. Harris's "The Both/And of Performance Research" makes a strong claim for the potential performance research has to bridge these models.

3. Certainly, when I was a faculty member at Auburn University, the administration routinely addressed us as "Auburn family."

4. This practice also is grounded in the idea that the scholar remains separate from their community rather than in regular communion with others working in the same discipline. A scholar in dialogue with others about the field is unlikely to be completely "anonymous," even if their name is removed from their scholarship.

5. Contrary to the way disability is typically presented in the popular imagination, disability is situational and constantly transforming. As a result, the relationship between a disabled person and their environment is constantly shifting. This often leads to accusations of faking disabilities on days when the relationship more closely resembles that of an abled person.

6. At the time of this writing, five years after my initial diagnosis, I am only beginning to train to use a white cane when navigating unfamiliar spaces where there are many obstacles. While I have been willing to address my blindness in public performance where I directly challenge audiences to reconsider the capabilities of those with disabilities, I have been unwilling to out myself as disabled in the world beyond the theatre. This unwillingness stems from fears of being infantilized, feared, or otherwise attacked for my disability and the way I handle it.

7. Or where disability is completely absent due to inaccessibility in spaces and practices. Carrie Sandahl's "Queering the Crip" (2003) provides a powerful analysis of the ways that making queerness and/or disability visible onstage is a practice of rebellion against cultural oppression and exclusion.

8. Earlier this year I learned from a genetics counselor that the results of this test had been poorly communicated to me and I was simply a carrier of the problematic gene, leading me to further distrust the value of ranking medical knowledge over the lived experience of disabled people.

9. The title comes from a joke I told in the performance: How do you punish a blind professor? Rearrange the furniture.

10. Generally, people understand blindness to be experienced as darkness. In actuality, blindness is a spectrum and the majority of blind people retain the ability to see something.

11. Rather, I took it to the ASTR forum since the official conference was cancelled due to a strike at the conference hotel. As a result, the piece was performed in a small rehearsal room on the University of California San Diego Campus.

12. Ruth Raynor (2019) describes a more effective example of an immersion of audience members in blindness via blindfolding in the Vancouver-based sensory experiment "Do You See What I Mean?" Audience members were led on an extensive immersive tour of the city, which ended in contact improvisational dance. Although she does not use blindfolds in her performances, Jessica Watkin (2017) uses lighting effects and audience engagement to evocatively immerse audiences in empowering experiences of vision loss.

13. Performance at the Eastern Michigan University Disability Arts and Culture Conference, December 2019.

14. Although scholars are often expected to return from sabbatical with quantifiable, concrete outcomes from their research, there is an understanding that the process will be leisurely and that it will provide time and space for scholars to work at a pace and in a manner consistent with the scholar's human experience. While not in the scope of this paper, there is much to untangle in terms of the ways that sabbaticals are often only available to the least precarious members of the professoriate—people on tenure-track lines not at community colleges. Given the prevalence of historically excluded faculty outside of these positions, sabbaticals are an example of crip time being used for the benefit of the most empowered. Furthermore, BIPOC, disabled, and other historically excluded faculty ineligible for sabbaticals are often forced to increase their labour in order to cover the work left behind by privileged faculty on leave.

15. The size of the space from which we stream this performance and the need to keep to as few people as possible involved in the performance limit some of our choices. Kelly Walker handles technician's lines, running the camera, switching microphones off and on, switching to prerecorded sound and video as appropriate, and interfacing with venues to ensure our technology works with their service providers. With only one person to handle all technical components, the camera has to remain near the computer controlling it and the person controlling the computer.

16. My livestream performance of "Awaiting Tiresias" for the Digital Research in the Humanities and Arts Conference has been published by *Body, Space & Technology* (May 2023) and is available for streaming.

17. The film version of *Awaiting Tiresias* is available at www.drheathermay.com/awaitingtiresias.

18. Audio description is a narrated description of relevant visual components to provide the necessary information for fully comprehending a piece of entertainment. Film and television programs do not consistently have audio description, and when they do it is often very difficult to access. For more information about audio description, check out the American Council of the Blind's "The Audio Description Project" (n.d.). This site also offers numerous definitions of audio description.

19. These external reviews are done as part of our tenure and promotion process and are given anonymously to the candidate. *Tone a Blind Eye* is available at www.drheathermay.com/tone-a-blind-eye.

20. Because I am not a particularly adept filmmaker, any revision that would require re-filming was likely to throw off the composition of the movie in ways that I could not fix without starting everything from scratch.

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