

# Improvising Fugitive Access: Drafting Mad Care in a Disability Arts and Culture Classroom

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## Drafting an Introduction: A Blank Page

I sit here, on the edge of my office chair, teetering on the precipice of a new school term. I am finalizing my syllabus for a course on disability arts and culture. This is a course I have taught multiple times before. And still, the feeling of uncertainty takes hold of me as I review the document on the screen before me. A feeling of failure can't be escaped. My course design fails to reconcile my dance/movement practices nurtured in disability arts community with the expectations placed on me as a university course instructor. My syllabus fails to embody the radically creative possibilities of disability culture within the colonial legacies that structure how we enter the classroom space and the neoliberal expectations of time that demand our productivity. I am failing to design a course and to write a syllabus that is legible to the expected rigour of the university. My course is failing to facilitate a space that can provide the kind of care I want to extend to my future students—the rigour of care my future students need.

My pulse begins to quicken.

I close the document to contain the looming tumult of anxious thoughts that will soon engulf me.

Trying to find something else to focus on, I open a PowerPoint presentation from the last iteration of this course. I click on a slide that comforts me. On this slide is a quote from La Marr Jurelle Bruce's book *How to Go Mad*

*Without Losing Your Mind: Madness and Black Radical Creativity*. It reads, “Radical compassion is a will to care for, a commitment to feel with, a striving to learn from, and an openness to be vulnerable before a precarious other, though they may be drastically dissimilar to yourself” (2021, 10). Bruce offers radical compassion as an ethical imperative to his proposal of a mad methodology. How can we engage such a methodological consideration in understanding my practices of teaching? How can we be open to the vulnerability of my current self, a precarious other to the drastically dissimilar version of a successful self that is disciplined within expectations of academic belonging? How can we care for a simultaneous failure to take on the role of course instructor and failure to embody the performance of a radical crip and mad artist?

Beside this quote sits the image of an art piece. On the slide is a picture of *Holding Space* by Gloria C. Swain, who identifies as a Mad, Black, aging artist. It was featured as part of *HIDDEN*, an exhibition curated by Swain in 2020 at Tangled Art + Disability in Tkaronto.<sup>1</sup> This installation consisted of a white stool in front of a white gallery wall covered in black text. Beside the text hung headphones through which you could listen to the text being read aloud. Underneath the headphones was a television screen playing a video of the ASL interpretation of the text. The text read:

#### HOLDING SPACE

This is a space for the artist who couldn't be here today.

Whether artists who suffer from invisible disabilities are our ancestors, those who have passed from systemic injustice and violence, those who are physically unable to be here because space is inaccessible or those who experience invisible struggles with mental health, this space is for them. They are artists whose work we value. They are families whose presence is important. We cannot be here, entirely, without acknowledging who are unable to be present today.

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<sup>1</sup> Footnote: Colonially known as Toronto, Ontario, Canada, Tkaronto is on Treaty 13 Territory and is the ancestral land and waters cared for and protected by the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishinaabe, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat peoples.

What does it mean to hold space for someone with hidden disabilities? Holding space means no judgment and opening your heart. It means showing empathy and compassion, and that strength and evolution can come from sharing space, ideas and experiences with other like-minded individuals. It means to put aside ableist thinking and offer unconditional love and support to someone having a difficult time. Holding space allows time for healing. It aims to acknowledge and validate what someone is going through. Holding space is about allowing someone to take all the time they need to heal. It's about assuring them they are loved, valued and irreplaceable. (Swain 2020)

In the class, we explore this as an example of the kinds of radical and rigorous practices of care developed within disability arts community. Together, we reflect on how Swain is urging us to question what it means to create art. And in doing so, Swain's piece becomes an embodiment of radical compassion, provoking questions that guide how we relate to space, to time, to our bodies, to ourselves, and to each other. What might it mean for us to hold space for our different mad, cripp, disabled, and nonnormative ways of being? What might such acts of holding space create? How might such creations mark us as trouble to the racial capitalist logics underlying artistic and academic demands for a final product? My students are invited to reflect on how these questions might shape the creative and artistic practices they are engaging with for their final project.

How has Swain's work shaped my teaching practice? Turning to the next slide, an access practice of *sharing in draft* is offered:

- To support my own anxiety/depression access needs, I ask that we engage in a practice of ***sharing in draft***.
- In doing so, I invite us to repeat, revisit, revise, remix, reframe, rethink, and reimagine anything and everything we share. This can be through class conversations, lectures, online discussion boards, assignments, presentations, office hour meetings, personal reflections, etc.
- I ask us to support each other in this process by acknowledging, respecting, and valuing the incompleteness of our offerings.

- Let's have **radical compassion** for each other and for ourselves by recognizing and committing to an understanding that everything we offer into this space is a work-in-process.

Sharing in draft is how I have radical compassion for my own way of processing ideas through fragmented, sometimes incoherent, rambling and messy thoughts. It holds space for the anxiety that prevents me from expressing myself and the depression that follows my perceived failure to express myself in the ways that I had wanted to. This practice is shared to model what it means to ask for what we need to care for ourselves throughout our time together as a class. This practice is asserted to hold space for these needs, and in doing so, the gesture of holding space is no longer just a critical act of recognizing the structures that police our acts of teaching and learning. It becomes a creative movement of pushing the boundaries of our imaginations so that we might reimagine how to be together differently.

These slides invite me to remember a student who was struggling to submit any of their assignments. I had encouraged them to submit whatever they had. I was ready and willing to give them the partial marks necessary to successfully pass the course. I emphasized that it did not have to be a final product; they could submit a draft. And as the final date came for me to submit my own marks, I anxiously awaited any response from them. Within the final hours before my own due date, their e-mail arrived with a document attached. . .

. . .the document was blank.

I marked their assignment as "incomplete."

I try to hold space for myself.

This gesture requires that we work to understand my failure to have radical compassion for this student. Space must be held to critically reflect on the conditions through which one can so easily take up the task of assessment and play the role of course instructor—a task and a role that can so easily reify the neoliberal expectations of academic belonging.

... the document was blank.

The assignment was marked as “incomplete.”

How can we hold space for teacher, for student, and for the webs of relations being etched onto this blank document?

Radical compassion invites us to reflect on this draft of my performance, and to imagine how to repeat, revisit, revise, remix, reframe, rethink, and reimagine a future draft of interpreting the task of teaching and the role of teacher. . .

## **Drafting a Method: Failure and Dramaturgy**

Through this critical-creative article, we can improvise through the gestures of failure that shape my experiences of teaching and learning within university spaces.

I fail to take on the role of university course instructor through neoliberal expectations of “excellence” (hampton 2023, 67), struggling to assign a grade to my students’ work, resisting the act of fixing a letter that marks them through a binary of success/failure. I further fail to disrupt such expectations by claiming my membership to the institutional life of the university (Cagulada and Esteban 2023, 142)—I do my job and give them a grade. This failure is felt through the anxiety that holds me back from engaging with the richness of my students’ work. This failure is embodied through the depressive gestures of stillness that pull me back to bed (Esteban 2023).

I massage the tension in my neck and remember Jack Halberstam’s suggestion of failure as a queer art. His provocations hold us in a tight and warm embrace:

What kinds of reward can failure offer us? Perhaps most obviously, failure allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behaviour . . . while failure certainly comes accompanied by a host of negative affects, such as disappointment, disillusionment, and despair, it also provides the opportunity to use these negative affects to poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life. (2011, 3)

I hold on to the creative potential of failure by pursuing its mad registers. Feelings of despair poke holes in an expected performance of teaching—a performance shaped through multicultural expectations of racialized labour that must be done with a smile (Esteban 2023; 2024, 56–57). As a sensation of release soothes my neck, my head begins to float and swirl with the dramaturgical possibilities of this critical–creative act of failure.

My understanding of dramaturgy is shaped through my dance/movement practices of improvisation. Vida L. Middelton calls us into “this space of embodied encounter [where] an improvised dramaturgy of the flesh refutes the separation of the intellect and the body, challenging the privileging of conceptual knowledge over embodied knowledge” (2015, 106). Dramaturgy is a doing that we are always and already engaging in through our embodied acts of inquiry. What knowledge is held within the tension of our muscles? What can be learned from gestures of massaging and through movements of releasing, floating, and swirling? This is also a narrative form of inquiry. Through improvisation, bodies navigate their movements amid the narratives that choreograph how we read meaning onto our gestures. Moreover, through such an embodied act of reading, our interpretation of these seemingly ordinary gestures holds the possibility of writing different choreographic narratives into being (Esteban 2022a, 138; 2022b, 95; 2023; 2024, 51). Such a possibility of difference is made possible when we invite madness to move us. Through the holes poked by despair, we can engage in what Elisabeth Motley suggests as a crip choreographic method of leaking into their openings to tell a different story of my mad movements through failure (2024, 56).

Pursuing these movements with and through madness, Jessica Watkin’s suggestion of *Disability dramaturgy* becomes both “a lens to analyze a play [in my case a choreography] for Disability and access features and the composition of those features,” and “a practise that can be a person stewarding the Disability-centred and care-full practices that develop Disability aesthetic, community, and culture” (2022, 6). In what follows, both aspects of Disability dramaturgy are explored as we work to analyze and embody my access practice of *sharing in draft*.

## A Theoretical Draft: Access and Fugitivity

Let's begin by dramaturgically analyzing my practices of access. Access is how I begin tackling the question of how to extend care within the structures of classroom choreography.

To start each class, my students are invited to participate in a check-in activity. You are invited to reflect on your own responses to these prompts shared with them:

- What is a word that describes how you are entering into the space today?
- What do you need, desire, and/or request to support you in accessing this space today?

I then invite them to bring some madness into the space by once again introducing my own access practice of sharing in draft.

Sharing in draft is a practice inherited from disability arts community and remixed through my own teaching within the university. It is a practice that I use to support my own anxiety and depression needs—an attempt to access care for myself, and to offer care for my students. And still, there is a different choreographic narrative here.

To reflect on this access desire, Tanya Titchkosky invites us to consider that “when it seems to us that the only thing that matters is the fight for access, *as though* this fight is not also constitutive of the meaning of people and places, we risk participating in the current regimes which know disability too well” (2011, 17). Titchkosky urges us to pause and to encounter this desire for access as an occasion to question our very desire to find belonging within university spaces in the first place. What institutional meanings of people and places allow for the constitution of my access request? What academic narratives of disability and madness does such a request for access know too well? How do these stories reveal something about the regimes of teaching and learning that choreograph our taken-for-granted ways of doing teaching and learning within the university classroom?

My attempt to assert a practice of sharing in draft gestures to, and holds the possibility of challenging, a form of knowledge exchange expected of us in the academy. As instructors, we must be experts. Every word uttered must be profound. Something noteworthy. After all, don't we expect our students to take notes during class? What stories of anxiety, of depression, of madness, of disability come from our attempts to access such a relationship of exchange? There are stories of failure, problem, and trouble. These are academic narratives that suggest that through the right accommodations we might overcome failures, fix problems, and get rid of trouble. But as disability studies scholar Rod Michalko suggests, "the trouble of disability persists" (2008, 401). Disability will always be trouble to normalcy.

While asserting the access need of sharing in draft, I am inevitably required to produce a final product that can be quoted in an essay or transformed into the correct response for an exam question. While this access need of sharing in draft might be extended to my students, they are ultimately required to produce a final product that can be assessed by me, the course instructor, and given a final grade to be fixed onto their transcripts. Madness will always be trouble to the university's normative relationships of exchange between student and teacher. Stuck within such inevitable trouble, let us return to Michalko, who further suggests that "our task becomes how best to live with and in it" (2008, 402). How might living with and in trouble allow us to return to sharing in draft as a practice that invites us to relate differently to expectations of finality and fixity? How might trouble provide an opening through which we might escape the impulse to reduce our acts of scholarly creation to academic products?

It is this task that turns me to fugitivity. Within black study, fugitivity is an idea, a theory, a practice—an act.<sup>2</sup> Following Nick J. Sciallo (2019), I work to understand fugitivity "as a state of existence"—a state of existence that is further given life through Saidiya Hartman's invocation of "the afterlife of slavery" (2006, 6). Fugitivity is a state of existence through black flight, an act

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<sup>2</sup> Footnote: I do not capitalize *black* when referring to creative and fugitive traditions of black study following Bruce's provocation to "emphasize an *improper* blackness . . . a blackness that is neither capitalized nor propertized via the protocols of Western grammar" (2021, 6). When referring to people's identities, I follow the lead of the artists and scholars I am referencing to honour each choice to capitalize or not capitalize b/Black.

of escaping the supremacy of whiteness that, following Sylvia Wynter, forces us to make ourselves knowable in relation to Western bourgeois mappings of “Man” (2003, 317). It is a state of existence through a movement away from the structures and systems that police us into such limited modes of human being. Turning to black study further allows us to trace the radical traditions through which madness becomes a source of creative struggle against the white supremacist logics of Enlightenment Reason that shape our understandings of selfhood in relation to a construction of humanness and personhood (Bruce 2021; Pickens 2019)—the individualizing categories that further objectify and contain us within the academic roles of teacher and student (Freire 2005, 73; hooks 1994, 16). Moreover, black study helps us to name the ways in which fugitive struggle is always and already happening through our everyday, mundane, and relational moves within, against, and beyond the ivory walls of the university (Cagulada and Esteban 2023; Harney and Moten 2013, 110).

Fred Moten further provokes us, suggesting that “fugitivity, then, is a desire for and a spirit of escape and transgression of the proper and the proposed. It’s a desire for the outside, for a playing or being outside, an outlaw edge proper to the now always already improper voice or instrument” (2018, 131). How can we desire this transgression? How can we embody this spirit of escape? How can we play and be in this outside space? This is where I invite us to pursue the fugitive possibility of disability’s trouble. If disability is inevitably trouble for the university, perhaps we might pursue the transgressive registers of such trouble. What might it mean to refigure disability as the proper site of teaching and learning to the always and already improper university institution that can only conceive of knowledge through an insatiable thirst for neoliberal capital? What might it mean to flee the structures and systems that impose and require such a binary of proper/improper in the first place?

In his keynote at a colloquium on critical disability discourse and higher education pedagogy hosted by the Institute for the Study of University Pedagogy at the University of Toronto Mississauga, Jay Dolmage (2024) identified an increase in the number of disabled students leaving the university due to the effects of academic ableism. As an audience, we were troubled by the statistics Dolmage shared. We were troubled that such a departure has resulted in many disabled students not completing their university degrees. What if we were to encounter this trouble as a

provocation—through Moten’s provocation of fugitivity? Rather than reifying the university as a space we all desire to be included into, how can we pursue this departure? How can we learn from this departure? How might disability already offer us a different way of embodying a spirit of escape through its inevitable departure from normative imaginaries of the “proper” student and the “proper” teacher? How might disability always and already invite us to play and be in this outside space through a failure to adhere to academic propositions of what education is—a failure that proposes different possibilities of what teaching and learning could be? In suggesting this, it is important to emphasize that we should be doing everything we can to ensure disabled students feel cared for within the university. Access within the classroom matters . . . it is, after all, how many of us in disability studies begin every class. And still, what if we were to question the ways in which access works to reify the ableist, sanist, colonial, and white supremacist narratives that make up the taken-for-granted choreographies structuring our every attempt to provide care for our students?

As I poke a hole in these choreographies, the possibility of access as a fugitive endeavour is released. A practice of fugitive access can then become a response to what J. Logan Smilges has identified as *integrative access*, the move to “prioritiz[e] the realignment of disabled people with existing institutional and economic norms over challenging the society that created them” (2023, 15). We are constantly encountering the task to interpret integrative access through our roles as teachers within the university. We are provided with letters from accommodations services of what students need: more time for tests and assignments, use of computers or other assistive technologies, note taking services, and so forth. Rarely do such accommodation requests force us to trouble our understandings of the classroom space, of assignments, and of teaching and learning more broadly. Most times, they position disability as trouble to the existing choreographies set in place within university teaching and learning. Accommodations must be reasonable; they cannot disrupt our day-to-day. To understand access as a choreographic fugitive endeavour, however, is to imagine other ways of interpreting our movements within the university. And to perform such fugitive gestures is to escape into critical creativity, moving through radical practices of access that seek to create spaces elsewhere and elsewhen.

In figuring fugitive access as a practice, we can be returned to my practice of sharing in draft. This is a mad practice that does not fit within the bureaucracy of university accommodations. It is an unreasonable practice as it defies the capitalist logics of product through which we get assessments, grades, and degrees. It is unreasonable as it troubles expectations of fixity through which we can come to understand success as the achievements on our transcripts and CVs. It is unreasonable in that it requires teachers and students to navigate access through relationship, negotiating individual and collective needs and desires, imagining ways of proceeding that remain unimaginable to the checklists of what is reasonable amid logics of austerity. It is unreasonable because it requires trust in teachers and students—it is a practice that cannot be controlled by the bureaucracy of the university institution.

I turn to the unreasonable movements through which I share in draft. By choreographically encountering my gestures of teaching and learning, we can work to identify the structures that shape my movements within the classroom and to understand the narratives through which they can be made meaningful. I turn to sharing in draft as borne of my improvisational practices as a dance artist and choreographer, inviting us to swirl within the possibility of André Lepecki's suggestion that choreography might become a "technology for inventing movements of freedom" (2013, 22). And by choreographically engaging my pedagogical strategies, we can pursue the ways in which our crip and mad movements work to write different stories of teaching and learning into being.

This is where I turn away from Lepecki's suggestion of choreography as a technology for invention. I turn, instead, to choreography as a space of dramaturgical encounter where we might take up Petra Kupperts's crip somatic offering of "practices where consciousness of embodiment and cultural formation intersect. Embodied labors of attention on the limits of self and world, a phenomenology that incorporates imagination with tentative reaching toward intersubjectivity and otherness" (2022, 29). Choreography is no longer a tool for the mere invention of movement. It is the creative space where we can encounter the movements that are already there. I turn and turn and turn within this radical space of reaching toward the fugitive movements that disability is always and already gesturing toward. We attend to the improvisational movements of navigating mad care within sanist

structures of the university, recognizing such a dizzying gesture as the fugitive act of hole poking that provides me/us access to mad choreographies of escape.

## A Choreographic Draft: A Dramaturgical Narrative

There is fugitive movement in practices of sharing in draft—a dramaturgical attempt to steward my students, and myself, into different stories of crip and mad creative community. . .

Navigating choreographies of knowledge exchange,  
structures of ivory,

*Enlightenment Reason*

moves us through normative expectations

*settler-colonial structures*

of classroom relations.

A statement is made,

*I am the teacher*

stand up,

*read as the “sage on the stage,”*

at the front,

*encountered as the “expert.”*

separated from my students.

An idea is offered. . .

... pause ...

try to breathe

... revise ...

can't catch my breath

inhale

edit,

exhale

another draft,

inhale  
develop,

exhale  
repeat,

inhale  
nonsense,

exhale  
exhausted.

. . . sit back down,  
recognizing my failure to make sense,  
failure to make sense as the “expert,”  
failure to be made sensible as the instructor.

Shoulders rise,  
neck tenses,  
an offering of another draft.

Uncertain,  
abdominal muscles contract,  
core holding on  
to keep myself upright,  
as statement becomes idea,  
lines blur  
as declaration unfurls itself into question,  
roles shift.

We don't get to every slide,  
don't get to answers,  
hands fly in the air,  
words blurted out,  
sentences interrupted,  
thoughts left unfinished,

no answers,  
just questions. . .

. . . we finish class incomplete.

Core collapses  
falling onto a bed beneath me,  
Sleep doesn't come to me,  
all I want to do is sleep.

Body rests in stillness,  
restless in our thoughts.

Motivation,  
a limited resource  
amidst my not knowing  
how to go on. . .

I read their weekly reflection journals:

A student takes up a question,  
a question inspires argument,  
fists clench but are not drawn,  
punches expressed with exasperated sighs,  
tentative hands relax  
gesturing to each other's  
feet tapping in  
reflection,  
different rhythms moving,  
not in unison,  
but sharing in  
the syncopation of  
our collective learning . . .

. . . another question from my fidgeting fingers  
reveals a repetition in reverse.

They are the teacher,  
sitting,  
standing  
lying, moving,  
and I am the student.  
anxious  
excited  
uncertain  
nervous  
curious  
prepared  
hungry  
not ready  
exhausted  
students school me on what it means to navigate care.

We are the teacher.

We repeat this dance.

We are the student.

We repeat this dance,

back and forth,

forth and back,

improvising over

and over

and over

multiple documents,

after class comments,

regrets,

questions,

concerns

sent via

e-mails,

e-mails,

e-mails,

e-mails,

e-mails,

e-mails,

e-mails,

discussed during office hour Zoom calls  
that always go too long,  
not long enough,  
so we meet,  
and we meet,  
repeat,  
repeat,  
blurring the binaries of role,  
defying deadline,  
and we don't get paid for this labour,

We don't get recognized for this act of study.

assignments blend into class  
discussions blend into readings  
blend into presentations blend  
into artistic creations blend into  
check-ins blend into concerns  
blend into fears blend into  
other discussions,  
the rambles,  
the rants,  
the debriefs,  
the spilling of tea. . .

other classes,  
the open letters,  
the artist statements,

the marching,  
rolling,  
sitting,  
lying in protest. . .

other assignments,  
the different assignments  
—no assignments,  
a blank page.

A blank page,  
theorizing  
traveling to other times,  
inhabiting other spaces. . .  
... something else. . .

... somewhere else. . .

... and still, the term comes to an end. A final draft must be submitted,  
and a final grade must be fixed.

... and still, gratitude.

## **Drafting a Conclusion: A Blank Page and Abolitionist Rehearsal**

I often think back to that blank page, reflecting on my failure to provide my student the care they needed. And still, they extend care, teaching me humility through their response back. They responded to being marked as incomplete with, "I couldn't thank you enough."

*Thank you.*

An appreciation for what?

An appreciation for my failure?

An appreciation of their failure?

An appreciation through our failure?

An appreciation that gestures to radical compassion.

An appreciation that recognizes failure but then offers it back to us as a draft.

An appreciation that invites us to keep trying—Vannina Sztainbok was right when she identified that "students school their teachers on what solidarity looks like" (Sztainbok et al. 2023).

This is an appreciation that gestures to the classroom as a rehearsal space, a place to engage in dramaturgical inquiry through the practising of teaching and learning. And as abolitionist scholar Ruth Wilson Gilmore suggests, “practice makes different” (2022, 3). The dramaturgical provocation, then, is to pursue the different ways of knowing and being that are released through this difference. We may be within the classroom, but we are still struggling to move away. It is no longer a mere escape from any place, but rather flight from the social imaginaries that give meaning to our movement within every space.

Yes, we are still within choreographies of the ivory tower.

Yes, we are still repeating its expectations.

And, if we are so moved by the transgression of disability, perhaps it is in such repetition that we might improvise other ways of being.

This improvisational process can be recognized as an abolitionist creative endeavour, what Gilmore suggests as “a fleshly and material presence of social life lived differently” (Petitjean 2018). We are attempting to interpret a different way of being within the classroom. We break from roles, break rules, break conventions of writing and reading, of teaching and learning. We move away from assessments and products. We find ourselves moving toward inquiry and process. And in this movement, we embody a different way of being together through our everyday performances of teaching and learning. This suggests a radical form of access that no longer wants inclusion in the *what is*, instead working to escape into the *what could be*.

Disability is always playing, doing, being outside normative exchanges of knowledge. In recognizing this, let us return to access no longer as a question of how to be included. Instead, access becomes a fugitive provocation to live with, in, and as trouble to normative expectations of university being. The pursuit of fugitive access becomes a dramaturgical invitation to interrogate and pursue the multiplicity of choreographies we navigate through our everyday acts of improvisation. . .

... we move through choreographies of academic regimes. . .

... we repeat their seemingly normative gestures. . .

... we improvise different paths that attempt to escape their expectations. . .

... we interpret the meanings through which we come to understand ourselves. . .

... we choreograph different ways of relating to one other. . .

... consider one last draft on how we might understand such a dramaturgical doing. Cory Nakasue describes dramaturgy as “the connective tissue between the present moment and history, individuals and collectives, and objects and their usage. . . . Like a spider’s web, it’s invisible, adjustable, and integral. Pull on one thread of the web and the landscape shifts, as do the actions that are supported. Dramaturgy is the spinning of this web” (2023, 1). Moving with Nakasue, let us end with the possibility of another beginning, a provocation for another and another and another draft. . .

This work is offered as a score for future improvisations,  
a past choreographic text,  
a present object of dramaturgical inquiry.

Pull on its fugitive threads—  
the words, phrases, and gestures that reach for us,  
to access our unravelling failures,  
to pursue the shifting landscapes of my mad being,  
to spin a different web of our crip becomings.

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