Resistant Bodies: Claims to Liberation and Desire at the Intersections of Crip and Queer

by

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On the shape of this project:

This thesis comes out of my studies in Wesleyan’s Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Program and the Studio Art Department, and includes both a written and artistic component. My project is interdisciplinary in that it explores a set of ideas through both academic writing and artistic means, and further, in its integration of movement, poetry, and visual art into one body of artistic work. The interdisciplinary nature of my work reflects a feminist belief in the integration of theory and practice, and in the application of feminist analysis to a range of disciplines and modes of expression.

The first part of this project is the written essay that follows in this document, entitled “Resistant Bodies: Claims to Liberation and Desire at the Intersections of Crip and Queer”. In the essay I explore representations of embodiment that are produced at the intersections of queer studies and disability studies, drawing on theory, literature, and performance art as my texts. Central to my inquiry is an understanding that the body is a site at which oppression is manifested, and from which resistance can be generated. This belief is the underlying current to my artistic work. Through printmaking and performance I explore embodied experiences of oppression and resistance, focusing on themes of queerness and disability.

My artistic work was exhibited under the title Re/memberings at Wesleyan’s Zilkha Gallery between March 30, 2010, and April 4, 2010, and featured four performances with a run time of 35 minutes. The body of printmaking work is made in the techniques of woodblock and zinc-plate etching, and is comprised of five portraits and one large piece containing 120 printed strips. Each portrait is of one of
the five performers, including myself, who collaborated on the movement and text presented as part of the project. The repetition of images inherent to printmaking enabled me to work thematically with the repetition of memory, with questions of visibility, and with images that functioned both as fragments and as whole. These themes were woven through our performance work.

In bringing collaborative, politically motivated performance work into the gallery I hoped to push the conventions of the space by challenging audiences to question their assumptions about the kind of work they expect to see in a gallery. With roots in both modern dance and in the overtly political art-form of spoken word poetry, our performance moved between the subtle and the overt. I hoped to question the centrality of the singular artist in visual art by presenting work over which I had only partial ownership. The process of producing the performance was highly collaborative, with movement generated collectively and spoken text generated individually by each performer. As a group we met for three hours every Friday afternoon throughout the semester. Our work together involved sharing stories of embodied memories- of how we have come to know our bodies, of what experiences have shaped us- and creating written work and movement based on those shared stories. The texts we produced are included at the end of this document. Through telling and reflecting we built a community from which to speak ourselves outward, a process of building that would come to be reflected in our performance work and would ultimately extend to implicate the audience. The process of collaboration and the practice of speaking reflect the feminist and liberatory project of this work.
The multiple modes of investigation that I undertook in this project challenged me throughout to consider how scholarly texts inform visual art and vice versa, how performance and printmaking might tell a coherent story together, how ideas develop differently in different media, and how to strike a balance between my vision and the influences of my collaborators. Sustained through these challenges and through different media is a feminist politics of liberatory embodiment.
**Introduction**

Central to this paper is the notion that oppressions are lived in our bodies, and that to survive, we must turn toward sustainable, celebratory, and resistant embodiments. Both disability and queer studies and activism are engaged in the project of naming the processes by which bodies are rendered deviant, abject, abnormal, or *wrong*, and instead centering queer and disabled bodies and communities as the bearers of transformative ways of knowing and being. This paper will look at texts that reside at the intersection of disability, or *crip*, and queer studies which react to the devaluations of oppressive power by turning inward toward the body as a site of knowledge, pleasure, and resistance. In asserting the body itself as a site of knowledge over and above the systems that seek to name it, in rendering the disabled and queer body visible, and in naming their desires, these authors and artists locate the body as a site of opposition to normalizing power. I will begin this exploration with an example that demonstrates how notions of queerness and disability interact, and how they are inextricably woven into ideologies of power and otherness.

Central to both queer and disability politics are questions of accessibility- to what is one allowed access? How do spaces extend and enable some individuals and not others? Who is allowed in, and who is kept out? Reading the news this morning, I was informed that as of today, January 4, 2010, the United States has lifted a 22-year ban on visitors to the country with HIV/AIDS.¹ I am struck by what this ban conveys about the ways in which disability and queerness converge with ideologies of power and otherness.

nationalism and security, and what it suggests about the identity of those both inside and outside the borders of the United States. The ban on visitors with HIV/AIDS suggests that the maintenance of able-bodied heteronormativity is central to the maintenance of the sexual and moral health of the nation. It suggests that the safety of the nation is threatened by those bearing an illness whose public image is inextricable from queerness and sexual deviance. The ban also affirms nationalist discourses that systematically erase queers and people with disabilities within this country by creating a false binary between those inside the United States as non-diseased and as heterosexual, and those outside of its borders as bearing illness and as outside of heteronormativity. In this process disability and queerness are made synonymous with all forms of otherness imagined as residing outside of, and in binarized relation with, the United State’s borders. Through borders drawn between who is “inside” and who is “out” along the lines of health and sexuality, we can see how national ideologies of able-bodied heteronormativity are integral to the perpetuation of American identity. The ban represents a powerful example of how illness-as-deviance and queerness-as-deviance are inextricable from each other.

Imaginings of queerness and disability as embodied forms of deviance have been central to the oppression and marginalization of a wide range of people. Imaginings of deviant sexuality have been central to the oppression of people with disabilities—often in the form of erasure of the sexuality of people with motor impairments and the hyper-sexualization of people with mental disabilities. Claims of disability have long been attached to queer sexualities in medical understandings of homosexuality and gender non-conformity as forms of mental illness and embodied
perversion. Disability and sexual deviance are attached in some way to almost all forms of marginalization. Women of color have been imagined as sexually deviant in national ideologies as long as this country has existed, and have subsequently been targets of regulation, sterilization, and abuse. Cultural imaginings of poverty and poor people are rife with mental illness and physical disability- the realities of which increase as government services assisting people with disabilities continue to disappear, and more people with disabilities are forced into, or deeper into, poverty. Because rights to health care are attached to the legal contract between a man, a woman, and the state that is marriage, many people who are denied access to marriage also face greater difficulty in attaining health care, and thus face greater risks of illness; namely queers, transgender people, and people with mental disabilities. Additionally, those whose community and family formations do not reflect the normative form represented by marriage, a reality more often present in the lives of people of color and poor people in this country, face decreased access to health care as it is distributed within the contract of marriage, and simultaneously, are rendered sexually deviant through their non-normative relationship to the normalizing category of marriage. In these ways and in countless others, disability and illness become naturalized as the domain of the poor, the queer, of people of color. These are but a few examples of the ways in which queerness and disability interact with, inform, and are inextricable from a range of inequalities. Central to these interlocking imaginings of the queer, disabled, “deviant” subject is that difference is located in the body. Through the functioning of oppressive ideologies of difference, the body becomes the site of abnormality.
Within queer and disability/crip studies and activisms, resistance to systematic and intersecting oppressions has emerged in similar ways. The terms *queer* and *crip* name particular activisms and means of knowledge production. The way I understand these bodies of work is as follows.

Disability/crip activism and theory provides a powerful, body-centered framework for rethinking the workings of oppression. The movement places the burden of blame not on individual bodies, but rather on the systematic devaluations and restrictions of those bodies enacted by an ableist, or “enabled”, society. This radical methodology responds to the ubiquitous medicalization and pathologization of non-normative, disabled bodies. In his essay “Stolen Bodies, Reclaimed Bodies: Disability and Queerness”, Eli Clare describes the disabled body as deemed ‘wrong’ by an ablest society: “The dominant paradigms of disability… all turn disability into problems faced by individual people, locate those problems in our bodies, and define those bodies as wrong.”2 Illness and “wrongness” have long been placed on the individual body, with an emphasis on the need for that body to physically change. The promise of disability/crip activism is a reversal of this thinking and the denial of the idea that crip bodies are ‘wrong’, instead turning that ‘wrongness’ back on an ableist society itself.

Queer theory and activism is based on a questioning and dismantling of norms, suggesting instead a paradigm of multiple and proliferating possibilities of desires and embodiments. It has emerged in part in response to a lesbian and gay politics that seeks to distance itself from everything deemed deviant, thus promoting

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ideals of marriage, whiteness, wealth, and able-bodiedness. Queer movements and knowledge production have pointed to the heteronormativity of society as the source of ideas of the “sexual deviance” of queer people, thus demanding that “deviance” is not something innate to queer people themselves.

Central to both ideologies of resistance is the notion that it is not the habits, bodies, and desires of individuals that are wrong, but rather oppressive structures and ideologies which fail to create environments that extend and enable those individuals. The words *queer* and *crip* have emerged in efforts to reclaim language once used against people with non-normative sexualities and people with disabilities. Insisting on the power to name oneself represents a shift of power away from those systems that seek to define individuals, and toward self-definition. In *Exile and Pride* Eli Clare discusses the power to name oneself: “*Queer* and *Cripple* are cousins: words to shock, words to infuse with pride and self-love, words to resist internalized hatred, words to help forge a politics.” These reclaimed words evidence an ideology of resistance that, rather than seeking assimilation and acceptance by the dominant culture, turns toward radically different modes of existence. In making this move queer and crip politics suggest that lives lived on the margins have much to offer those lived at the center. Queer theorist Michael Warner, in *The Trouble With Normal*, suggests that queer life has much to offer: “If there is such a thing as a gay way of life, it consists in… a welter of intimacies outside the framework of professions and institutions and ordinary social obligations. Straight culture has much to learn from it, and in many ways has already begun to learn from it. Queers should

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be insisting on teaching these lessons.”⁴ Similarly, disability theorist Paul Longmore insists:

“Deaf and disabled people have been uncovering or formulating sets of alternative values derived from within the deaf and disabled experiences... Those values are markedly different from, and even opposed to, nondisabled majority values. They (disabled people) declare that they prize not self-sufficiency but self-determination, not independence but interdependence, not functional separateness but human community. This values formation takes disability as its starting point.”⁵

This paper will suggest that queer and crip understandings of embodiment have much to offer majority values.

Within the work of the authors and artists I will consider in this paper, three important threads will emerge as central to queer and crip resistance: 1. Making the experiences of disabled and queer bodies central to ideologies of resistance, thus decentering the power and salience of dominant ideologies of embodiment. 2. An intersectional analysis of oppression, with a focus on how narratives of disability and queerness interact with other axes of privilege and oppression, such as race and class. 3. A focus on the disabled and queer body as bearing knowledge, desire, and pleasure, and as itself a site of resistance to the systematic devaluations of dominant ideologies. The texts I consider will serve as sites from which to expand outward, examining


critical work done in the intersection of queer and disability studies, as well as a locus
toward which to draw theorists of the body and subjectivity inward.

In the first section of this paper I will use Sara Ahmed’s work in *Queer Phenomenology* to explore the way oppressive power inhabits and devalues the bodies of individuals. I will put Ahmed’s work on the social location of the body in conversation with questions of access and accessibility, examining three situations in which queer, transgender, and crip subjects face limited access to institutional and private spaces. These examples will help me to describe how individual bodies are systematically rendered “inside” or “outside”, normal or abnormal. I will use Robert McCruer’s definition of *crip* to turn us toward responses to that power which seeks to render queer and crip bodies “wrong”.

In my second section, I will use Judith Butler’s *Excitable Speech* to think about how the interpellative power of medical speech calls individual bodies into being as “disordered”, and simultaneously, how one might resist this call. I will look at two texts dealing with the medicalization of queer and disabled bodies, the first by Dean Spade and the second by Abby Wilkerson. I will consider Butler’s theory of interpellative power in terms of Spade’s and Wilkerson’s texts, which describe the way queer, gender non-conforming, and disabled bodies interact with and resist medical discourse and the naming of non-normative bodies as “disordered”. Spade and Wilkerson locate the power to name and to know in individual bodies themselves.

In the third section I will focus on queer and crip author Eli Clare and the body politics he asserts in his memoir, *Exile and Pride*. Clare grounds an intersectional model of identity in the body, using the confluence of experience at the
site of the body to hold space for diverse experiences to coexist. As explicated from the lived sight of the body, their intersection is made real. In this section I will consider models of intersectional identity as theorized by feminists such as Kimberle Crenshaw, Gloria Anzaldúa, and the Combahee River Collective. In offering his body as a unique site of intersectional identity, Clare prioritizes a politics of endlessly multiple embodiments.

In the last section, I will begin by considering Eli Clare’s call to reclaim the devalued body in response to systematic oppressions. I will put the idea of reclamation in conversation with Judith Butler’s “Violence, Mourning, Politics” to think about the vulnerability of the social body, and about the possibilities for resistance and for moving away from oppressive devaluations. I will look at the work of performance artist Bob Flanagan and performance collective Sins Invalid, both of which work at the intersection of disability and sexuality. In their performances, these artists assert the experiences of queer, disabled bodies, and represent those bodies as sites of knowledge and pleasure. By embracing vulnerability and interdependence, by imbuing the individual with the agency to reimagine the socially-produced body, and by rooting these struggles in community, the work of these artists fiercely locate liberatory struggle in the body.

Section 1: Accessing Ideologies: Ahmed’s Orientations and McCruer’s Crip Theory

This section will lay groundwork with which to think about how power works on bodies. The concepts of “access” and “accessibility” have much to do with disability and queer studies, as they pertain to the ways in which bodies are rendered
normal or abnormal based on the normative ideologies that structure institutions. I will use Sara Ahmed’s work in *Queer Phenomenology* to think about how questions of access speak to the ways oppressions impact, and are lived in, the body. At the end of this section, I will turn to Robert McCruer’s understanding of the political potential of *crip* as a means of resisting the hegemony of able-bodied, heterosexual embodiment.

Perhaps at its simplest, Sara Ahmed’s thesis is that “the body gets directed in some ways more than others.”6 *Queer Phenomenology* describes a subject’s embodied relationship to the world in terms of how our bodies are orientated in space and toward others. Her work theorizes the ways in which bodies are extended by some spaces and not extended by others. To be “extended by the skin of the social”7 is to be in line with, or enveloped by, the dominant ideologies, actions, and habitations of a space. This metaphor of *skin* suggests that that which is social extends, holds, and contains. It suggests continuity- a continuity that ultimately excludes. *Skin* here also suggests the body in its physicality- the subject at play in the social sphere is an embodied one. *Skin* also points to the importance of race and the appearance of skin color. The skin of the social means skin that is white- to have skin that is black or brown is most often not to be extended by the skin of the social. “The skin of the social” moves us to imagine the social as simultaneously a continuous force that binds, and one which acts upon and through bodies in the world.

By questioning what happens when a body is not extended by the skin of the social Ahmed’s work theorizes the phenomenology of oppression. “If orientation is

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7 Ahmed 10.
about making the strange familiar through the extension of bodies into space, then
disorientation occurs when that extension fails. Or we could say that some spaces
extend certain bodies and simply do not leave room for others.” Ahmed is speaking
of the way in which all spaces bear markings of gender, race, class, and ability. As
social beings, we learn codes that direct us toward some spaces and away from others,
codes that leave us feeling comfortable, or safe, in some spaces, and not elsewhere.
As I write this I sit in the library of a college that I do not attend, but which I am
using as a place to work while away from my school. I sit here relaxed, comfortable-
I even have my shoes off. This comfort comes from the knowledge that I could easily
be mistaken for a student here. I am young, I am white, I am wearing clothes that
mark me as somewhat alternative. I have my personal computer with me, and I came
in wearing appropriate winter attire. All of these things mark me as someone who
might inhabit the space of a small, elite, liberal arts school, and my presence is not
questioned. Thus, I can focus on writing without concern that someone might
question my presence or monitor my behavior during my time here. Central to
Ahmed’s argument is that there are many circumstances in which a person might not
experience this: If ze does not speak English, is not white, or does not have the
clothing, hairstyle, personal items, and mannerisms that mark hir as being middle,
upper-middle, or upper class. If ze has a disability, is gender-non-conforming, or is
not between the ages of 18 and 25- or, for any of the reasons listed, ze has not learned
the rules of library etiquette. Because I do not fall into any of these categories I am
extended and enabled by this space. Simultaneously, my presence perpetuates this
space as being accessible, comfortable, and safe for those who are like me. This

8 Ahmed 11.
extension occurs in the present but also bears the weight of history. Universities were made for the perpetuation of the knowledge and power of a few. Being enabled by this space also extends into the future- it will help me to succeed academically, which will help me get a job, which will likely perpetuate my class position, etc. All of these temporalities are at once at play in thinking about access.

In this examination of my present situation, we can see not only how my socially-located body is extended by the space of the university, but also the ways in which Ahmed’s concept of orientations plays out. Ahmed suggests that the paths we find ourselves on and the spaces we move toward and through can be described as orientations. She asks the question: To what do we find ourselves drawn? Largely because of my family’s class position, I have been orientated toward the university literally from birth. As I drove across town this morning, I was orientated toward this space. Simultaneously, the location of my body in this space speaks to a history of access.

In thinking about queer and crip, it seems that Ahmed’s theory of the phenomenology of oppression has much to do with access. Queer and crip people and communities deal consistently with questions of access and accessibility. These questions take forms that are often concretely physical- as in the ability to physically enter and occupy a space- and also take the form of how one experiences comfort and safety in a space. Informed by Ahmed’s understanding of how bodies are guided and shaped, my work takes up the question of: Where does a body find itself when it is not extended by the skin of the social? In the next part of this section, I will look at specific issues of accessibility that reflect how queer and crip people experience
systematic regulation of their bodies. These examples will demonstrate how space, often institutional, bears in its structure the designs of a “normal” body. Bodies that do not fit into that space are rendered abnormal in their inability to inhabit that normalizing institution. In this way and in these moments, bodies are rendered different. They are, often quite literally, outside of a space and thus become, and are continually affirmed as, outsiders. By using Ahmed’s framework for thinking about the interactions between bodies and space, I will use these examples to describe parallel and intersecting systems by which non-normative bodies are systematically rendered different.

One meaning of accessibility pertains to the ability of individuals to enter, use, and move within spaces. The structuring of institutions often results in spaces that are inaccessible to people with disabilities. At these points, the institution fails to extend the individual. Reflecting my current reality, I will continue thinking about the dynamics of the university. Wesleyan University has a group called Wesleyan Students for Disability Rights (WSDR), which is a group of students with disabilities and their allies working for disability rights in many aspects of the university. WSDR recently presented a document to the university entitled “A Statement of Needs and Goals: Addressing Accessibility on Campus”, which they describe as, “A preliminary assessment of areas that must be addressed in order to help Wesleyan University become a more accessible campus, where every student may learn, develop, and thrive.”9 The document thoroughly assesses the institution’s failings in many different areas of accessibility. The group’s demands include: the need to provide floor plans

for all campus housing, the need for greater access to therapy through OBHS, the need for more transparent and accessible policies regarding medical leave, the need for disability awareness workshops for faculty and staff, and the instigation of a disability studies program. ¹⁰ The university is an institution that in its mission promotes highly specific ideals of exemplary mental and physical achievement. If you look at the Wesleyan University website, you will notice this in the pictures of students achieving feats of athleticism. You will see it in the admissions website’s elitist references to student’s ability to quote Homer and Hume. The promise offered by the school is that they will provide students with the resources and training with which to achieve these feats—the student will be extended by the university. Simultaneously, the student’s achievements will perpetuate the university’s ability to promote itself as an agent of extension. Students with disabilities are not guaranteed this extension. Rather, they face consistent exclusions from the structures within which they must succeed in order to achieve the ideals presented by the university. As reported in WSDR’s document, this can take the form of professors not including a statement about accommodating students with disabilities in their syllabi. It could also take the form of ResLife lacking floor plans for students who have needs for specific kinds of housing based on mobility impairments. Or, the literature and tours offered by the admissions office rendering students with disabilities invisible, thus discouraging prospective students with disabilities from seeking admission.¹¹

Ahmed conceptualizes the ways in which bodies are orientated in space as following along lines. In any given situation the subject’s path from point A to point

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¹⁰ Myrseth and Stout.
¹¹ Myrseth and Stout.
B is determined by many factors. She says, “The lines we follow might also function as forms of “alignment”, or as ways of being in line with others… We are “in line” when we face the direction that is already faced by others. Being “in line” allows bodies to extend into spaces that, as it were, have already taken their shape. Such extensions could be redescribed as an extension of the body’s reach.”12 As WSDR’s document makes clear, the university exists in a certain “shape” which is designed to extend students without disabilities. Students with disabilities are blocked from being “in line” with other students, and with the university itself, because they cannot enter a building, because they cannot meet a deadline, or because they struggle to cope emotionally with the pressures of the environment. Because students with disabilities cannot align themselves with their peers in the ways the academic, bureaucratic, social, and/or physical structures of the university demand of them, often, rather than being extended by the school, they find themselves, and their bodies, rendered abnormal.

The gender-segregation of bathrooms offers us another example of the way in which embodiment is regulated by normative ideologies. Transgender and gender-non-conforming people face consistent issues of access to gender-segregated public spaces. Because of the fierce gender policing that occurs in public bathrooms, using them is a daily, persistent concern for people whose gender expression and/or identity does not match normative understandings of their assigned sex. For these people, bathrooms are inaccessible spaces. In a letter negotiating for gender-neutral bathrooms in his organization’s shared office space, Dean Spade, founder of The Sylvia Rivera Law Project, writes:

12 Ahmed 15.
“Many trans and gender variant people have appearances that are not consistently read as “male” or “female.” This means that every time we need to use a bathroom, we face a decision about which bathroom will be safer, never knowing whether we will encounter harassment, embarrassing stares, or even violence or arrest. I, myself, have been kicked out of both “women’s” and “men’s” bathrooms numerous times, and unlawfully arrested and held overnight for using the “men’s” bathroom.”

Bathrooms are spaces that exist in nearly every public facility, whether commercial or state-run, educational, recreational, medical, “correctional”- and in each of these spaces, transgender and gender-non-conforming people face policing, discomfort, and exclusion. Bathrooms are public spaces which enforce normative ideologies of gender upon individuals, and specifically upon their bodies, as the basis of bathroom segregation is of course bodily. Dean Spade describes the segregation of bathrooms as being based upon two concerns, both centered on normative meanings of the body: modesty and safety. On modesty Spade says:

“Some people have suggested that this is rooted in the heterosexual assumption of our culture: that we are assumed to be sexually attracted to people of the so-called opposite sex, and we are taught to hide certain bodily functions from them as part of that relation. For

whatever reason, when many people first consider using a non-gender-segregated bathroom they feel a sense of embarrassment or shame.”14

As Spade suggests, fears of interacting with the so-called opposite sex in bathrooms are rooted in heteronormative ideas about how the body should or should not be exposed. The other concern he observes is that of women’s safety. Feminist debates over the regulation of “women-only” and “safe” spaces have centered on ideas about the agency of genitals, with anti-trans viewpoints arguing that the mere presence of a penis has the capacity to render a space unsafe for women. The safety of women in bathroom spaces seems to rely on a similar imagining of the ways in which genitals themselves, rather than people, are central to the enactment of violence. In these ways, we can see how the regulation of the public space of bathrooms is based in notions of how gendered bodies should (and should not) be exposed and protected. In encountering difficulty and denial in accessing these spaces, trans and gender-non-conforming people find themselves denied participation in the normative notions of embodiment framing that space. In this denial these bodies are rendered abnormal.

Questions of access, of course, do not only concern one’s physical ability to enter a space. Accessing a space may be physically possible in many situations in which a person fails to access, and thus find himself extended by, the norms shaping that space. Ahmed describes the experience of existing within her family as both an insider and outsider. Being a lesbian has rendered her outside of the “social” in the ways she is excluded from diffuse cultural traces of heterosexuality.

“Now in living a queer life, the act of going home, or going back to the place I was brought up, has a certain disorienting effect… The “family home” seems so full of traces of heterosexual intimacy that it is hard to take up my place without feeling those traces as points of pressure. In such moments, when bodies do not extend into space, they might feel “out of place” where they have been given “a place.” Such feelings in turn point to other places, even ones that have yet to be inhabited.”

In describing the ways in which norms shape how one feels encompassed by a space and those within it, Ahmed describes the phenomenology of oppression. To be queer and to exist within hegemonically heterosexual spaces is to be rendered “out of place”, even when one is, in some ways, encompassed by that space. Though of course the cultural markings of queerness- clothing, hairstyle, mannerisms, gender expression, engaging in public physical affection- can exclude individuals from family spaces altogether or can force them to hide, Ahmed is talking about the consistent press that occurs on the lives of individuals who are orientated toward that which is foreign to the ideologies of the heterosexual family sphere. The skin of the social in the family sphere is most often heterosexual, and thus it is heterosexuality that impresses upon bodies within family space. These impressions take forms such as: gender-normative clothing and mannerisms, discussion of future marriages and children, traditionally-gendered distribution of household tasks, or allotment of resources and money based on one’s engagement with heterosexual institutions such as marriage. In living a queer life one often finds oneself out-of-line with these trajectories, and thus outside of the alignments that guide family space. In this way

15 Ahmed 11.
queer individuals may experience opposition to the family sphere rather than access and extension.

As these examples demonstrate, to access a space is to find oneself extended by the ideologies shaping that space. Points at which access is blocked illustrate how normalizing institutions fail to extend bodies that do not align with the ideologies within which they function. As I have demonstrated, it is in being denied access to spaces such as universities, public bathrooms, and the family sphere that bodies are rendered abnormal. It is this rendering, as it has been elaborated by queer theory and disability studies, that this paper is concerned with.

Crucial to the projects of both crip and queer is the idea that deviance, difference, or abnormality is not innate, but rather rendered through repeated exclusion. In the last paragraph, I quoted Ahmed as saying: “Such feelings (of being out of place) in turn point to other places, even ones that have yet to be inhabited.”

The remainder of this paper will examine what, in being turned away, one turns toward. As theorists such as Adrienne Rich and Judith Butler have elaborated, power functions as a series of repetitions, and in each of these repetitions exists the possibility of oppression, but also of resistance. The authors, activists, and artists I engage will suggest that in encountering the ways in which power renders bodies deviant, abnormal, or wrong, the body itself can function as a site of resistance. Central to this resistance is the act of naming normalizing forces as such, and imagining ways of being that are in opposition to those forces. This is the project outlined by Robert McCruer in Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Disability and Queerness, whose work I will turn to in the conclusion of this section. McCruer’s

16 Ahmed 11.
work understands the project of *crip* as one which names, in their diversity, those forces that seek to erase, absorb, and pacify disability, and to assert instead a politics that places a queer notion of disability at its center.

McCruer defines “coming out crip” as asserting resistance to able-bodied heteronormativity. This definition incorporates queer notions of identity in the way it not only questions dominant ideologies, but simultaneously maintains a critique of disability identity politics that demand assimilation, tolerance, and acceptance. To “come out crip” McCruer says, means “insisting that… a disabled world is possible.”

He challenges the pursuit of assimilation, suggesting instead that the way in which disability and ability function needs to be broadly reconceptualized within dominant economic and cultural logics of acceptance and tolerance. This understanding of what it means to be crip informs this paper in two important ways. The first is that it demands the centering of disability and of queer bodies. This necessarily decenters the power and salience of dominant ideologies of embodiment. The second is an intersectional analysis of how oppressions are lived, with a focus on how narratives of ability are intimately entwined with other dominant systems such as heterosexuality and whiteness. McCruer’s analysis of disability and queerness pushes us to imagine, both specifically and broadly, what it might mean to center the experiences of those bodies, individuals, and communities that have been either absorbed or relegated to the margins. This essay takes up this call, exploring authors, activists, and artists who are engaged in queer and crip world-making projects of imagining and realizing communities, language, and spaces that orientate us toward

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ways of being that decenter normative ideologies of embodiment, and in their place, offer resistant bodies.

Section 2: Butler, Spade, and Wilkerson: The Language of Disorder

In this section I will consider three texts that describe resistance to power that medicalizes and pathologizes queer and crip bodies. I will use Judith Butler’s *Excitable Speech* to think about how language is imbued with interpellative power, or the power to call a subject into being. I will consider this theory of interpellative power in terms of two texts that describe the way queer, gender non-conforming, and disabled people interact with and resist medical discourse and the naming of non-normative bodies as “disordered”. In opposing the idea that the medical establishment bears knowledge over and above the individual body, these texts locate the power to name and to know in bodies themselves.

The idiom “words wound” describes the power of language to affect us, implying with the physicality of the word “wound” that language can damage an individual. Wound here is both being used as a simile- with the implication that to wound someone with words is *like* wounding them physically- but also speaks to the physical reality of the body’s relationship to language. As anyone who has ever received bad news, or been the recipient of a lover’s adoration knows, language affects us physically. Judith Butler, in *Excitable Speech*, asks what it means to be subject to the power of words:

“When we claim to have been injured by language, what kind of claim do we make? We ascribe an agency to language, a power to injure, and
position ourselves as the objects of its injurious trajectory. We claim that language acts, and acts against us, and the claim we make is a further instance of language, one which seeks to arrest the force of the prior instance. Thus, we exercise the force of language even as we seek to counter its force, caught up in a bind that no act of censorship can undo… Is our vulnerability to language a consequence of our being constituted within its terms?"\(^{18}\)

Language names, describes, and claims us, and thus, we are vulnerable to its meanings. Though Butler firmly locates the subject within the power of language, she does not suggest that this is a static position. Rather, in “exercising the force of language even as we seek to counter” it, we are constantly implicated in its replication and in its meanings - we have the capacity to use the power of language to describe ourselves even as we are described by it.

For instance: Let’s imagine that an individual walking down the street is called “faggot” by a passing car. There are several things happening in this instance. The individual is being forcibly interpellated, or called into being, as a faggot- as homosexual and wrong, as deviant, as different, perhaps as “sick”. This naming may forcibly occupy their body- perhaps they feel fear in their stomach, anger, a heightened heart rate, shame. In this single moment of contact with “faggot”, the individual is reminded of a homophobic society within which they exist, and their reaction to it is based on the entirety of their past relationship with the word “faggot”, as well as assumptions about future interactions with homophobic language. This

moment of interpellation is comprised of past, present, and future. It is never a singular moment, but rather represents, as Butler calls it, a “condensed historicity”. However, the contours of these temporalities are neither static nor simple. That passing slur of “faggot” is by no means a simple moment of oppression. Soon, the “faggot” may tell the story of this instance to friends, perhaps humorously, using any number of names and descriptors for the homophobic passengers of the car. Perhaps the story will be told with anger, and in speaking this anger, the strengthening of community and communal political will may occur. As Butler describes, the act of hate speech is not merely an effect of an oppressive structure, it is the realization of that structure. And because each act of speech enunciates that oppression, each act also represents an opportunity for subversion.

“Might the speech act of hate speech be understood as less efficacious, more prone to innovation and subversion, if we were to take into account the temporal life of the “structure” it is said to enunciate? If such a structure is dependent upon its enunciation for its continuation, then it is at the site of enunciation that the question of its continuity is to be posed.”

The act of speaking “faggot” is necessary to the maintenance of power, with the continued dominance of a homophobic society resting on the collection of moments like this one.

Resistance is located in the instability of this reiteration. As movements to reclaim words like *queer, crip, bitch,* or *dyke,* have shown, words call us into being,
words describe us, words wound, but words and the power they represent cannot foreclose the possibility of a subversive response. I will consider how two activists and theorists working in the interstices of queer and crip have articulated this subversion. The first is Dean Spade, who, in “Resisting Medicine, Re/modeling Gender”, describes the relationship of power between the medical establishment and transgender bodies. Spade discusses the usefulness and failings of a model of disorder and disability in arguing for trans rights. The second text is Abby Wilkerson’s “Disability, Sex Radicalism, and Political Agency”, which uses queer and disability perspectives to describe the desexualization of disability, positing sexuality as central to political agency. By engaging these texts with Butler’s theory of language, power, and resistance, I will offer examples of how queer and crip resistance to discursive power can be located in the body.

Dean Spade’s “Resisting Medicine, Re/Modeling Gender” resists the idea that to be named by medicine necessarily means occupying the entirety of a medical subject position. As Spade describes, to occupy the embodied subject position of transsexual requires a relation to the medical establishment and its discourses. Within the conceptualization of the medical and psychiatric establishment an individual is not transgender until named as such, and thus, in order to gain access to the surgeries and hormone treatments they need and want, trans people need the illocutionary act that is “you are disordered”- specifically, as having Gender Identity Disorder, or GID. As Spade describes, within this naming one is seen to occupy a narrowly understood transsexual subject position reliant on a heavily binarized understanding of gender.
“The medical approach to our gender identities forces us to rigidly conform ourselves to medical providers’ opinions about what “real masculinity” and “real femininity” mean, and to produce narratives of struggle around those identities that mirror the diagnostic criteria of GID. For those of us seeking to disrupt the very definitions and categories upon which the medical model of transsexuality relies, the gender-regulating processes of this medical treatment can be dehumanizing, traumatic, or impossible to complete.”

The failure of a binarized gender approach is that it denies the complexities and diversities of people’s experiences of transgender identity and denies the agency of a subject to make choices about what is best for them. It is only through compliance with these denials, and in being named as absolutely and unambiguously “disordered”, that the individual can access the body modifications they need and desire.

Spade discusses how transgender has been imagined within a disability model in order to legitimize the needs and desires of trans people in the eyes of the law. In referencing a case in which he fought for the rights of a young transwoman in foster care to wear skirts and dresses, Spade describes how a GID diagnosis was used:

“Claiming disability discrimination required pleading a physical, mental, or medical impairment resulting from anatomical physiological, genetic, or neurological condition which prevents the

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exercise of a normal bodily function or is demonstrable by medically accepted clinical or laboratory diagnostic techniques.” 22

Because the use of Gender Identity Disorder as mental illness has secured access to medical care and to legal protection from discrimination for transgender people, trans rights have been sought within this framework of disability. The failures of this model are that it limits the diversity, ambiguity, and complexity of transgender embodiments, and it renders subjects dependent on the medical establishment for “treatment”. Despite protests from Spade, the team of lawyers he worked with used this diagnosis in court because his client needed access to things located within the control of the medical establishment—treatment, hormones, medicine, surgery, and permission. To access these resources, one must be named within medical language—one must be called into being as a disordered subject.

Ultimately, Spade’s view on this court case resists the use of a model of disability to legitimize trans bodies. This move is strongly aligned with crip and disability rights politics. By resisting a model of medicine that privileges medical and scientific knowledge over the knowledge of an individual, and by turning analysis away from trans bodies and onto the medical establishment itself, Spade legitimizes the transgender individual’s understanding of hir body. In doing so he destabilizes what it means for medicine to know and to name “disordered” bodies.

“Trans people could use the disability rights framework to argue that we are fully capable of participating equally, but for artificial conditions that bar our participation... Like others in the disability rights movement, trans people are fighting against entrenched notions

22 Spade 32.
about what “normal” and “healthy” minds and bodies are, and fighting
to become equal participants with equal access and equal protection
from bias and discrimination.”

As we see in the case of Spade’s client being denied the right to wear feminine
clothing in her foster home, it is the transphobic conditions of institutions that prevent
trans people from accessing the things they need, not, as we are told, the “illness” or
“incoherence” of trans bodies themselves.

Abby Wilkerson’s work around disability and sexuality speaks to how bodies
are rendered sexually “deviant” by medical discourses, and in this naming are forced
to occupy the contours of that subject position. In her essay “Disability, Sex
Radicalism, and Political Agency”, Wilkerson draws on both queer and disability
perspectives to describe how sexuality is a key locus at which subjectivity can be
understood. As work in feminist theory, critical race studies, and queer studies have
all suggested, cultural imaginings of an individual body as sexual, or non-sexual,
stigmatized, deviant, fertile, hypersexual, oversexed, or the object of violence
determine how that individual experiences subjectivity and agency. Wilkerson’s
work is concerned with how cultural and medical erasure of the sexuality of people
with disabilities acts to limit their political agency.

She describes many instances in which medical discourse, often in the very
literal form of a doctor’s words, denies the sexuality of people with disabilities.
Three instances she reports include: “A man and a woman who had spent years living
in an institution for people with epilepsy wanted to marry, and requested permission
of a doctor at the institution. They were told “that they could get married, but they

23 Spade 34.
were not allowed to have sex.”

She reports an instance in which Elle Becker, who is paraplegic, had the experience of being denied birth control by her doctor: “About four days after I broke my back I asked my surgeon, ‘I don’t have my birth control pills with me. Is there something I can do about that? He said ‘Well, you don’t need those anymore,’ and walked out of my room.”

Wilkerson also tells of the abuse of a young boy with an intellectual disability: “A young boy living in an institution masturbated in the presence of others “by rubbing his thighs together when sitting down. So the staff at the institution attached sandpaper to the insides of his thighs.”

In each of these instances we can see that in the relationship between disability and science, the power to name and to know, and the agency to act, is held by those doctors, scientists, psychiatrists, and administrators legitimized by scientific discourse. The act of examination is assumed to flow from those who are “normal” to those who are “abnormal”. As Wilkerson notes, this “abnormality” is constructed within systems of discursive power:

“Medical epistemology views illness or disability as an individual organism’s departure from biological normalcy, rather than a condition which always develops in relation to a particular social context… Medical discourse thus underpins social practices that marginalize people with disabilities, while presenting these social practices as the inevitable consequence of biology.”

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25 As quoted by Wilkerson, 34.

26 Wilkerson 34.

27 Wilkerson 49.
Medical discourse acts upon the body, calling disabled subjects into being by naming them in medical language as such, and often simultaneously, as Wilkerson writes, as asexual.

Wilkerson’s text calls for a shift in knowledge from medical and scientific discourses of the asexuality of people with disabilities, relocating that knowledge to the individual body by declaring the reality of desire in the lives of people with disabilities. This is a call that is very queer in its demand for the proliferation of possibilities of sexuality and desire: “Neither medical fatalism nor medical relegation of some to a lesser status or a life without sexuality is fully deterministic in the end, nor are other oppressive cultural norms. Alternative possibilities for politics and pleasures are being imagined and enacted individually and collectively.”

Sexual agency represents a critical way in which power is experienced by subjects. The right to be recognized as a sexual being speaks to a larger social dimension in which one’s identity is recognized and respected. By asserting the right to, and existence of, the sexuality of people with disabilities, Wilkerson’s work resists the power of medical discourse.

In pursuing this line of thought she works with both queer and disability studies, and her work demonstrates one way in which these lenses critically inform each other. She says:

“Queer perspectives have helped us to understand and resist regimes organized around controlling a variety of sexual identities and practices. Disability perspectives reveal the broad array of cultural norms which privilege an illusory ideal mind and body at the expense

28 Wilkerson 53.
of our actual bodies of all shapes and sizes, which are subject to a host of contingencies and are all too fragile, yet capable of a vast array of thoughts, movements."\(^{29}\)

Queer perspectives provide a way of understanding how sexuality serves as a means of controlling and stigmatizing bodies deemed deviant. By embracing the multiplicity of sexualities that exist outside of what is deemed “normal”, Wilkerson queers disability. Simultaneously she crips sexuality by questioning its inherent abled-bodiedness. In both, she imbues the disabled body with the power to know and to act on desire.

**Section 3: Intersectional Identity in Eli Clare’s Exile and Pride**

In this section I will focus on one text, Eli Clare’s memoir *Exile and Pride*. I will describe how Clare’s text articulates resistance to devaluing power by asserting an intersectional model of identity, and by locating that model in the body. I will examine the body politics Clare asserts in his text, suggesting that *Exile and Pride* offers a queer politics of embodiment in two important ways. First, it dismantles ideas about normative embodiment by naming and describing those systems which perpetuate them and asserting a politics of pride in opposition to them. Secondly, Clare’s text centers the idea that embodiment is necessarily diverse, and prioritizes the notion of a multiplicity of embodiments. In doing so, he suggests that liberatory struggles cannot be neatly separated from one another, and that they cannot be dislocated from the body.

\(^{29}\) Wilkerson 37.
In *Exile and Pride*, Eli Clare asserts a powerful body politics. From the first page, on which we find him grappling with the task of climbing a rain-slick mountain and with the limitations, both physical and mental, presented by his cerebral palsy, Clare’s work explores the complexly interrelated space between how bodies are felt, experienced, and imagined by an individual, and how bodies are read, reacted to, and acted upon by others. By drawing on his experiences of race, geography, ability, gender, sexuality, abuse, and class, and by devotedly drawing those experiences back to his lived experiences of embodiment, Clare collapses an imagined distance between the politics of identity and the individual body. He says: “Our bodies are not merely blank slates upon which the powers-that-be write their lessons. We cannot ignore the body itself: the sensory, mostly non-verbal experience of our hearts and lungs, muscles and tendons, telling us and the world who we are.”

By grounding his experience of himself in his physically lived reality, Clare locates the body within the complicated space between discursive power and individual agency. *Exile and Pride* traces Clare’s narrative as it exists in this space, understanding his experiences in terms of movement away from and back to his body; in terms of his narrative of reclamation. This reclamation of his body as valuable and desirable does not represent an autonomous taking-back of embodiment from the ‘forces-that-be’. Rather, Clare’s memoir is about uncovering and naming those forces that have shaped and defined his embodied experience of himself, and the power of reimagining the body as a site of pleasure, agency, exertion, and knowledge. In this reimagining, Clare denies the idea that bodies are inherently problematic and instead locates the

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oppressions of disability, homophobia, transphobia, sexism, racism, erotophobia, and all the ways they intersect, in social forces themselves. Clare’s move away from the pathology of individuals creates a critical space within which bodies deemed “wrong” can exist a situation of greater livability.

Central to Clare’s project is the idea that the body is the site of confluence of many different kinds of power whose effects cannot be extricated from one another. The intersectional nature of power and oppression has been theorized by feminists of color such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Kimberle Crenshaw, Audre Lorde, and the Combahee River Collective. Their work came out of experiences of oppression along the lines of race, gender, and sexuality, and theorizes that the way these subjectivities intersect cannot be understood within any one frame of reference. In Borderlands, Gloria Anzaldúa describes living as Chicana, as queer, as female, and as transnational:

“As a mestiza I have no country, my homeland cast me out; yet all countries are mine because I am every woman’s sister or potential lover. (As a lesbian I have no race, my own people disclaim me; but I am all races because there is the queer of me in all races.) I am cultureless because, as a feminist, I challenge the collective cultural/religious male-derived beliefs of Indo-Hispanics and Anglos; yet I am cultured because I am participating in the creation of yet another culture.”

Anzaldúa speaks of being both outside and inside- of her race, her sexuality, of her gender, of her country. Her experiences exceed these categories, and in their failure

to contain her she experiences contradictions. In claiming that she has “no homeland”, but that she is simultaneously at home with queers and with women, she carves out a space where there is no space. Clare’s work takes up this analysis, claiming multiple identities while acknowledging the contradictions inherent to those categories. The intersectional model of identity he asserts makes room for a wide proliferation of embodiments and experiences of self. In doing so, he centers an understanding of embodiment that presupposes bodies as diverse and multiple rather than contained within the bounds of strict norms.

As told through a collection of stories and essays, Eli Clare’s life narrative holds the confluence and coexistence of multiple axes of identity. He claims the name “crip”, as well as “queer”, he identifies as trans, as being from rural roots, as white. He writes again and again about how, as he lives them, these forces cannot remain disparate. He claims multiple identities while acknowledging the endless specificities within those categories, and, through basing his experiences of them in his body, allows them to coexist. In the final chapter of his text, entitled “Stones in My Pockets, Stones in My Heart”, Clare begins with:

“Gender reaches into disability; disability wraps around class; class strains against abuse; abuse snarls into sexuality; sexuality folds on top of race… everything finally piling into a single human body. To write about any aspect of identity, any aspect of the body, means writing about this entire maze. This I know, and yet the question remains: where to start? Maybe with my white skin, stubbly red hair, left ear pierced, shoulders set slightly off center, left riding higher than right,
hands tremoring, traced with veins, legs well-muscled. Or with me in the mirror, dressing to go out, knotting my tie, slipping into my blazer, curve of hip and breast vanishing beneath my clothes. Or possibly with the memory of how my body felt swimming in the river, Chinook fingerlings nibbling at my toes. There are a million ways to start, but how do I reach beneath the skin?”32

This passage speaks to the inextricable nature of the often simplified categories through which we interact with the world. In asserting that these axes of identity “reach”, “wrap”, and “strain” into one another, Clare points to the ways in which lived experiences are more complex and multi-faceted than can be described by a stable category such as “disabled” or “queer”. The notion that these ways in which we experience the world are mutually informing destabilizes the solidity of identity categories, suggesting in their place an endless multiplicity of embodied experiences.

Clare goes on to describe the ways in which his gender identity influenced his experience of disability, and vice versa:

“I think about my disabled body, how as a teenager I escaped the endless pressure to have a boyfriend, to shave my legs, to wear make-up. The same lies that cast me as genderless, asexual, and undesirable also framed a space in which I was left alone to be my quiet, bookish, tomboy self, neither girl nor boy… If I had wanted to date boys, wear lipstick and mascara, play with feminine clothes- the silk skirt and pumps, the low-cut blouse, the outrageous prom dress- I would have had to struggle much longer and harder than my nondisabled

32 Clare 123.
counterparts… But to cast my abiding sense of gendered self simply as a reaction to ableism is to ignore my body and what it had to tell me.”

Through his exclusion from heteronormative scripts of sexuality and gender Clare found a space within which to foster his non-conforming gender identity. His young experience of the gendering of disability was unusual in the way it at times encouraged, rather than constrained, his gender identity. This experience is likely to be lost within a normatively gendered understanding of disability, or an ableist understanding of gender-non-conformity. This story demonstrates how “gender reaches into disability”. To complicate this further, the particular gendering of the ideals of femininity Clare resisted existed in a specifically classed and raced space— that of a white, American, working-class community. By acknowledging and holding space for the complexity of identity, Clare’s narrative pushes against stable ways of knowing bodies.

We see this also in Clare’s description of feeling dislocated from the rural community he calls home:

“In its narrower sense, queer has been home since I became conscious of being a dyke. At age 17, I left the backwoods of Oregon with a high school diploma and a scholarship to college, grateful not to have a baby or a husband… since then, I have lived among dykes and created chosen families and homes, not rooted in geography, but in shared passion, imagination, and values.” He goes on to add, “Exile. If queer is the easiest, then exile is the hardest. I lie when I write that

33 Clare 135.
home is being a dyke in dyke community. Rather, home is particular
wild and ragged beaches, specific kinds of trees and berry brambles.”34

Clare’s sense of home is inextricable from his sense of both place and of queerness. Home is Port Orford, Oregon, and the woods he grew up working, running, and playing in. Home also cannot be only Port Orford, because there is no queer community for hundreds of miles. His queerness pushes against his sense of connection to a landscape and a way of life. His rural roots pull against his need to live among people with similar values. Clare goes on to add that the sense of mobility he used to propel himself outward from Port Orford came from his location as working-class in a poor town. His sense of necessity in leaving was fueled by his experiences of being sexually abused within his family. No one experience of himself can be extricated from another.

Carol Cohen’s essay “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?” discusses the problems and potentials of queer politics, ultimately suggesting that the revolutionary potential of queer lies in the recognition that, in the “multiplicity and interconnectedness” of a diverse range of subjectivities, the potential of coalitional work can be realized based on a shared opposition to marginalizing power. In her essay, Cohen points out how queer politics that understand oppression within binarized terms of queer/straight, deny, in practice, the intersectional politics they envision: “One of the great failings of queer theory and especially queer politics has been their inability to incorporate into analysis of the world and strategies for political mobilization the roles that race, class, and gender

34 Clare 30.
play in defining people’s differing relations to dominant and normalizing power.”³⁵
Cohen’s work does not discount the potential of a definition of queer which imagines a destabilized relationship to power, but rather points out the way the meaning of queer in activist communities has shifted away from this, and in fact often runs the risk of reinstituting binaries. Her response to this is to suggest that what queer political work has the potential to do in destabilizing identity is to suggest a politics that builds not only on shared identity, but on “shared marginal relationship to dominant power which normalizes, legitimizes, and privileges”³⁶.

“I want to be clear that what I and others are calling for is the destabilization, and not the destruction or abandonment, of identity categories. We must reject a queer politics which seems to ignore, in its analysis of the usefulness of traditionally named categories, the roles of identity and community as paths to survival… Instead, I would suggest it is the multiplicity and interconnectedness of our identities which provide the most promising avenue for the destabilization and radical politicalization of these same categories.”³⁷

Clare’s work clearly articulates the “multiplicity and interconnectedness” of identity, and in doing so, asserts embodiment as necessarily diverse. Cohen’s politics of resistance help us to understand the potential of Clare’s work. By describing the diversity and multiplicity of embodied experience, Clare positions himself in


³⁶ Cohen 481.
³⁷ Cohen 480.
opposition to marginalizing power and in coalition with other resistant bodies and communities.

Clare’s experience and analysis of power and resistance is uniquely powerful in the way it centers the queer, crip body as a site of knowledge and power. In the first chapter of *Exile and Pride*, titled “The Mountain”, Clare locates himself in terms of his lived experiences of his body:

“Home starts here in my body, in all that lies imbedded beneath my skin. My disabled body: born prematurely in the backwoods of Oregon, I was first diagnosed as “mentally retarded,” and then later as having CP… My body violated: early on my father started raping me, physically abusing me in ways that can only be described as torture… My white body: the only person of color in my hometown was an African-American boy, adopted by a white family. I grew up to persistent rumors of a lynching tree way back in the hills, of the sheriff running people out of the country… my queer body: I spent my childhood, a tomboy not sure of my girlness, queer without a name for my queerness.”38

Throughout his work, Clare constantly circles back to the body, grounding us in his muscles and lungs, refusing to separate the workings of power from the way oppressions and liberations are lived and felt. In doing so he locates the body at the center of the “progressive, transformative, coalition work” his text offers. Gloria Anzaldúa offers a poetic analysis of the body lived in the borderlands:

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38 Clare 10.
“Indigenous like corn, like corn, the mestiza is a product of crossbreeding, designed for preservation under a variety of conditions. Like an ear of corn- a female seed-bearing organ- the mestiza is tenacious, tightly wrapped in the husks of her culture. Like kernels she clings to the cob; with thick stalks and strong brace roots, she holds tight to the earth- she will survive the crossroads.”

Anzaldúa’s language grounds the mestiza’s strength in physicality, using corn as a metaphor for her survival as an embodied subject amidst the failures of definition. In his essay “The Mountain”, Clare does the same:

“The body as home, but only if it is understood that bodies are never singular, but rather haunted, strengthened, underscored by countless other bodies…. The body as home, but only if it is understood that place and community burrow deep into our bones… The body as home, but only if it is understood that language too lives under the skin…. The body as home, but only if it is understood that bodies can be stolen, fed lies and poison, torn away from us… The body as home, but only if it is understood that the stolen body can be reclaimed.”

Clare’s lived experience holds the confluence of intersecting, mutually informing relationships to power, and his stories of how they meet in his body allow them to coexist. His embodied experiences of intersectional identity offer his body as a whole, living, breathing example of survival amidst the failures of definition. Clare’s body acts as the flesh-and-blood stability which holds, with the surety and stretch of

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39 Anzaldúa 81.
40 Clare 12.
skin, his interwoven experiences of power and liberation. In refusing to let the contours of his subjectivity and the workings of power exist only in the abstract, he insists on his own complicated existence; we are forced to confront the implications of his survival.

Section 4: The Reclaimed Body: Bob Flanagan and Sins Invalid

In this section I will consider the Eli Clare’s makes in *Exile and Pride* to reclaim the devalued body in response to systematic oppressions. Judith Butler, in the essay “Violence, Mourning, Politics”, speaks of the body as constituted in and through others- in embodied vulnerability to violence and to harm, in desire, in interdependence. I will use Butler’s work to think about how this vulnerability may be used in the creation of resistant communities and in the reclamation of bodies. The performances of artists Bob Flanagan and Sins Invalid offer embodied resistance to the violence of devaluation by asserting crip and queer bodies as sites of knowledge and pleasure.

Central to Eli Clare’s *Exile and Pride* is the idea of reclaiming the devalued body. To “reclaim” something implies ownership, loss, and a regained ability to call something one’s own. For Clare, this entails tracing a path away from, and back to, his body. That “coming back” means claiming the body as valuable and desirable, and embracing that which has been rendered “different”. Postmodern theorists of subjectivity have told us that because the individual necessarily comes into being in relation to the social, there is no “outside” of norms. What, then, does it mean to “reclaim” the body within the limits of being a social being? Where does one
reclaim, or take back, to? Clare’s understanding of reclamation does not suggest an autonomous taking-back of the body from the grip of hegemonic devaluation, but rather an assertion that amidst those forces that have shaped him, he retains the agency to understand himself in relation to alternative communities and paradigms. Social norms cannot be rejected, as they shape Clare’s experiences of himself and of the world. Rather, the act of “reclaiming the body” describes imagining and living his body in the context of communities that foster alternative understandings of embodiment:

“In queer community, I found a place to belong and abandoned my desire to be a hermit. Among crips, I learned how to embrace my strong, spastic body. Through feminist work around sexual violence I came to terms with the sexual abuse and physical torture done to me. And somewhere along the line, I pulled desire to the surface, gave it room to breathe.”41

The agency Clare experiences is never outside of the context of the social, but rather exists within alternative imaginings of social life.

Judith Butler’s essay “Violence, Mourning, Politics” is concerned with how the agency to resist oppression may be fostered by and as socially located beings. She challenges the idea of a solid, singular, embodied individual, and in its place asserts that, because we are constantly being acted upon by and made legible within systems of understanding and power outside ourselves, “the bodies for which we

41 Clare 134.
struggle are not quite ever our own”. 42 Butler’s assertion that “my body is and is not mine” 43 begins to explore the complexly interrelated space between how bodies are felt, experienced, and imagined by an individual, and how bodies are read, reacted to, and acted upon by others. Butler says,

“Each of us is constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies- as a site of desire and physical vulnerability, as a site of a publicity at once assertive and exposed. Loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments; exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure.”

Butler suggests that to be embodied is to be vulnerable to others, and that within that vulnerability is revealed our relation to, and co-constitution with, others. This interdependence means that resistance necessitates counter-body-cultures.

The work of creating communities in relation to which bodies can be claimed is being done by activists and authors like Dean Spade, Abby Wilkerson, and Eli Clare, it is being done by activist groups like Wesleyan Students For Disability Rights, and it is being done by artists such as Bob Flanagan and Sins Invalid. Bob Flanagan’s performance work deals with the pleasures and pain of SM sex and how this practice exists in conversation with the chronic pain of his cystic fibrosis. Sins Invalid is a performance collective whose multi-media work focuses on issues of

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43 Butler 25.
44 Butler 20.
disability and sexuality, with a focus on the work of queer and gender-non-conforming people of color. In their work, these artists use performance to assert counter-narratives of embodiment, and in doing so, claim the queer and crip body as other than devalued. The vulnerability of exposure that occurs with performance invites the potential for harm, but also opens a space within which counter-body-cultures can develop. In “Queering the Crip or Cripping the Queer?”, Carrie Sandhal discusses the potential of crip and queer performance for enacting new communities. “Solo performance played an important role in articulating for the disability community and the culture at large the paradigm shift of disability from individual medical tragedy to minority activist identity.”

Performance allows the performer to assert hirself on hir own terms, and to bear control over the narrative the audience will understand the performer within. Where narratives of tragedy or “supercrip” triumph may be those attached to the performer’s body most often, in the act of performing the performer has a great deal of agency in shaping the narrative the audience reads hir within. The audience experiences the performer as an agentic individual, rather than someone who is only acted upon. By using the body as political text, these artists locate liberatory struggle in the body.

Bob Flanagan was a nationally-known performance artist, writer, and comic whose work dealt with pain and pleasure, illness and sex, and centered on the performance of sadomasochism. His work dealt largely with cystic fibrosis, the disease Flanagan dealt with since birth, and which he died of at the age of 43. His performances included acts of body modification, sadomasochistic sex acts, spoken

word, humor, and video, and were often performed with his long-term partner and domanatrix, Sheree Rose. Flanagan’s piece “Why Poem” is a video poem that speaks to the factors that shaped his desires and their enactment. It features a montage of home videos from Flanagan’s youth, layered over by his voice speaking text. By listing forces concrete and abstract, Flanagan offers an inquiry into the forces that have shaped his embodiment. The poem begins with:

“Because it feels good; because it give me an erection”, and continues with lines such as, “because kids beat me up on the way to school; because I was humiliated by nuns; because of Christ and the Crucifixion… because my mother bought me Tinker Toys; because hardware stores give me hard-ons… because of the The Pit and the Pendulum, because of the Tower of London, because of the Inquisition.”

The video images the viewer sees are largely of children playing in a setting normative to a white, middle-class American family. Some are inflected with Flanagan’s sickness, as in a shot in which he struggles to keep up with the roughhousing of his friends- some are not. “Why Poem” reflects the multiple, inextricable moments and encounters that shape the body. The viewer comes to understand Flanagan’s embodiment and desire in terms of what Sara Ahmed would call a “history of arrival”.

In Flanagan’s work the body is a site of pain, but also a site of pleasure. In dealing with chronic illness Flanagan’s body is subject to a great deal of pain that is out of his control. In the power-play of SM sex, he asserts agency over pain and uses

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46 Flanagan, Bob. “Why Poem”.
it as a means of pleasure. In what he describes as “fighting pain with pain”\(^{47}\), Flanagan uses the enactment of his desires to make his body more livable. In “Why Poem”, he describes his desires and performance work thus: “because I was born into a world of suffering; because I’m attracted to it; because I’m addicted to it; because endorphins in the brain are like a natural kind of heroin; because I learned to take my medicine; because I was a big boy for taking it.”\(^{48}\) In the interactions between illness and sex in his performances, Flanagan asserts pain not as something out of his control, but as something he has agency in enacting, in controlling, and in gaining pleasure from.

Flanagan’s work employs vulnerability in a way that transforms a paradigm of the disabled body as subjected and reasserts it as agentic. This occurs in his performances of vulnerability to his partner, and in vulnerability to his audience. In the on-stage performance of sex acts in which Flanagan is subjected to his partner, Sheree’s, domination, the embodied vulnerability Flanagan experiences is used in the pursuit of pleasure. This challenges a normative understanding of the disabled body as vulnerable to illness and to pain, to the invasiveness of medicine. Indeed, the perceptions of others and the attention of medicine have often acted on Flanagan in ways that are harmful, objectifying, and exposing. In “Why Poem”, Flanagan says, “because of my parents; because of doctors and nurses; because they tied me to the crib so I wouldn’t hurt myself…because I had to take my clothes off and lie inside this plastic bag so the doctors could collect my sweat.”\(^{49}\) Flanagan challenges the

\(^{48}\) Bob Flanagan, “Why Poem”
\(^{49}\) Flanagan, “Why Poem”.
history of these gazes by engaging his audiences with his body and his practices, using the vulnerability of exposure to shape how he is perceived. He seeks out his audience, as opposed to being forced under the scrutiny of doctors and nurses, of the gaze of strangers. By using the exposure of his body for pleasure, Flanagan transforms his relationship to embodied vulnerability.

In Violence, Mourning, Politics”, Butler suggests: “The body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch, and to violence, and bodies put us at risk of becoming the agency and instrument of all these as well. Although we struggle for rights over our own bodies, the very bodies for which we struggle are not quite ever only our own.”50 To be embodied is to be exposed to the gaze, touch, and violence of others. As evidenced in Flanagan’s work, this necessary vulnerability can be the cause of harm, but can also be used in building community and in enacting desires. In their performances both Bob Flanagan and Sins Invalid use exposure of the body to alter perceptions of the disabled body as something that is only acted upon, instead offering those bodies as desiring and agentic.

Sins Invalid is a performance collective based in San Francisco, whose work gives voice to a wide range of embodiments. Their mission statement reads:

“Sins Invalid is a performance project that incubates and celebrates artists with disabilities, centralizing artists of color and queer and gender-variant artists as communities who have been historically marginalized. Our performance work explores the themes of sexuality, embodiment and the disabled body. Conceived and led by disabled

50 Butler 30.
people of color, we develop and present cutting-edge work where
normative paradigms of "normal" and "sexy" are challenged, offering
instead a vision of beauty and sexuality inclusive of all individuals and
communities.\textsuperscript{51}

The collective brings together a range of art forms and performers. A few examples
of their work include the following:

A man named Antoine Hunter moves across the stage energetically and
sensually, shirtless, wearing only white pants. The MC has told the audience that
Antoine is deaf, and then has an audience member role a die to determine 1 of 6 songs
possible songs that will provide the soundtrack to his movement. The die speaks to
the risk a dancer who is deaf or hard of hearing takes in moving without knowing the
sounds around hir. Hunter offers his movement to the audience, knowing that the way
his body interacts with the music and the way his piece is perceived will be left in
part to chance.\textsuperscript{52}

Mat Fraser is a white man wearing cut-off shorts whose arms and hands are
smaller than the average person’s. Fraser energetically shadowboxes on stage while a
soundtrack plays in which we hear commentary that has been directed at Fraser over
time, remarking on his body, his sex life, tokenizing him as “my disabled friend”,
showering him with praise, and telling him he is the source of great inspiration. Over
the four minutes during which Fraser dodges, kicks, and punches, we witness him
tire. At about the third minute, it becomes clear that the enemy he is fighting is


wearing him down. By the fourth minute he lies on the ground, bleeding from the
mouth, reacting to the kicks of an unseen enemy. Fraser’s story is of the way words
wound and reach into the body even against his determination. It is of the way power
works diffusely, devaluing his body and experiences through the repetition of casual
comments from strangers.53

Maria R. Palacios takes the stage. She wears a flowing skirt, and has long
brown hair. From her wheelchair, she begins speaking a poem about her past lovers
and her hunger for them. Gesturing strongly and sensually, she tells the story of
growing up Latina, female, disabled, and being told she would never get married,
never have children, never have lovers. She describes herself as:

“The hot-blooded Latina whose very body broke the mold of the
perfect daughter, perfect wife, perfect this and that, I was never
expected to be, somehow… I learned to survive on my own, and on
my own I learned about sex and love, and confused the two at times, as
I found myself trying to define womanhood and the white heterosexual
able-bodied impossibility of things... I am real. Real defined in my
own, rebellious, passionate way. Because I became feminista,
revolutionaria, pancha vida, female Che Guevara, disabled woman of
color who has grown poems and children in her womb.” 54

53 Fraser, Mat. 2009, San Francisco. Sins Invalid: An Unshamed Claim to Beauty in the Face of

54 Palacios, Mary. 2009, San Francisco. Sins Invalid: An Unshamed Claim to Beauty in the Face of
Palacios’ voice speaks with surety and rebellion. Her manifesto speaks of the ways in which disability and other axes of power and oppression interact, the ways in which she is living an existence in which she “was never expected to be”. And yet, she sits before the audience, proclaiming her passions, her hunger for the bodies of her lovers. In asserting her sexuality, her motherhood, her art, she asserts her existence against narratives which deem her invisible or incapable.

Through their performances Sins Invalid creates a space and a vision toward which a community can orient itself. Because in turning away from devaluing norms one must have something to turn toward, this community is necessary in enacting the crip and queer world Robert McCruer deems “is possible”. It is a community built on the vulnerability of the performers through the exposure of their bodies and their stories.

As with Eli Clare’s *Exile and Pride*, the vision of Sins Invalid centers an understanding of identity that recognizes the multiplicity of experiences of embodiment and of oppression. In doing so they disrupt the idea of disabled and queer bodies as “different”, or as “wrong”, and reassert them as central to liberatory struggle. A statement of their vision reads:

“Sins Invalid recognizes that we will be liberated as whole beings – as disabled/as queer/as brown/as black/as genderqueer/as female- or male-bodied – as we are far greater whole than partitioned. We recognize that our allies emerge from many communities and that demographic identity alone does not determine one's commitment to liberation. Sins Invalid is committed to social and economic justice
for all people with disabilities – in lock downs, in shelters, on the streets, visibly disabled, invisibly disabled, sensory minority, environmentally injured, psychiatric survivors – moving beyond individual legal rights to collective human rights. Our stories, imbedded in analysis, offer paths from identity politics to unity amongst all oppressed people, laying a foundation for a collective claim of liberation and beauty. 55

As has been explored throughout this paper, crip and queer politics seek not only to assert a view of embodiment opposing normative understandings, but to place crip and queer understandings of embodiment at the center of liberatory struggle. Sins Invalid’s performances present a wide range of experiences of oppression, of disability, of queerness, of race, and in doing so make a “collective claim of liberation and beauty” that places the body, in all its multiplicity, at its center.

Conclusion

In my final days of writing this paper, the media is inundated with images of an earthquake-devastated Haiti. As the news reels role I find myself being presented with the media’s age-old sensationalized and racist portrayal of “third-world” people of color. The internet, the radio, the television all inform me of mass rioting and of the threat of violence. How many times have we heard this story presented about large numbers of black and brown people, both inside and outside our national borders? Again and again over the past week, the world has been told that dead

bodies line the streets of Port Au Prince. As I receive images of the bodies of dead and dying Haitians, I ask myself: Would images of the dead bodies of American soldiers be broadcast with such indiscriminate ubiquity? Would images of the bodies of white people in the United States or Europe in a similar situation be broadcast with the same lack of reverence? Why were we spared those images of the bodies of victims of 9/11, but shown those of the victims of Hurricane Katrina? In the widely broadcast images of the dead bodies of Haitian citizens we are told the tired tale that these bodies are less human, less civilized, and that they are less worthy of mourning than those who are white and who live within the borders of the “first world”. They become naturalized as the objects of tragedy and violence. And in telling ourselves this story, we in the United States, especially those of us who are white and who are not in poverty, are constituted as more human, more worthy, and less vulnerable to the violence and chaos of life. In this moment of tragedy I am reminded of how bodies come to bear meaning. I am reminded of how bodies come to be the site at which oppressions are manifested. I am reminded of how bodies bear “histories of arrival” that determine how we will experience vulnerability and violence.

The question this paper has sought to answer is: “In turning away, what do we turn toward?” In the face of such tragedy and of such vicious and cyclical forces of oppression, at times it seems impossible to know where to turn. In feeling overwhelmed by the magnitude of tragedy that is possible in this world, I am reminded that the power of the work I’ve considered in this paper lies in its ability to bear things both large and small, systemic and individual. The authors, artists, and activists I’ve engaged are concerned with how the intimacies of embodied experience
are inextricable from the workings of power, and how we must resist that power to survive. These authors tell us that resistance must occur on many levels— in the body, in immediate community, in a larger political community, globally— and that none of these can exist in isolation. Indeed, at the heart of these theories, activisms, and performances is the notion that living resistant embodiments requires communities toward which to turn. The queer and crip world-making that Dean Spade, Abby Wilkerson, Judith Butler, Sara Ahmed, and Robert McCruer are engaged in, that Bob Flanagan and Sins Invalid are performing, is a project of building spaces toward which resistant bodies may be orientated. In the interstices of queer and crip are found subjects who are fighting to make their bodies buoyant. By reclaiming language and bodies, by building community and spaces which foster resistant ways of being, by producing writing and art that assert their experiences, they are imagining the wild possibilities of powerfully resistant bodies.
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Print.
Re/membering 
by Áine McCarthy

I. Releasing 
We set foot into the turning and turning, the path takes us in, unwinds us.

She says she goes to the movies by herself and sits there spreading her toes apart.

She tells us freedom is the space between your toes.

Eleven circles enfolded, we release our feet to follow the shape of the stones laid into the ground for us.

Upside down, he says we would all be a lot happier if we did backbends everyday.

turning over and over the embodied mystery of existence.

How are we to live in these bodies?

II. Receiving 
Six petals surround the center that receives us

asks us to stop. Rest your hand on your belly. Feel how alive you are.

III. Returning
Moving backwards, she says, is a shamanic way of entering.

Write your intention down. Don’t erase it.

He writes, your memory causes new warmth to grow in my solar plexus.

He is hunched over writing, then leaning back, looking out the window, clearing his throat.

How are we to live in these bodies together?

Eleven circles unfolding to follow the thread out the way we came in.

*Solvitur Ambulando.*
It is solved by walking.

We set foot into the turning and returning to the embodied mystery of existence.

She is running backwards
She is entering—
She doesn’t know what
I was born into a family of women who rarely die, a story I tell. It sounds like: I don’t want to live like my great-grandmother. It means: I don’t know where I fit there, in a family full of women. It means: I don’t know what to call myself.

1. From the back page of Jacoby’s zine: They never taught us that knives can love too…. I wanted to line my gut with that poem, remind it to stop quaking.

2. Doctors are always wanting to fix something. The surgery has a 50% success rate. Success is defined by any improvement, mostly cosmetic. One surgery is rarely enough to maintain success. Dad is blind in one eye.

3. My back was tangled, one big knot. My stomach protested, wouldn’t let me eat some days. The body is not built to be contained by anything but itself. Skin wants to be touched. N. asked me what it was all for.

4. I don’t remember the first time I was cut open, except I’m sure I was wearing my green velvet dress. Mom tells me I’m making it up, but it had a big white collar I spilled ginger ale on. I couldn’t make out the edges of the cup.

5. I woke up twice to blood-tears. I never knew how red my insides were, bright and flashing.

6. The nurse asked what I was there for. I said “mastectomy, basically” she scolded me said “say recontouring, say reconstruction, say rebuilding” she said “don’t be ashamed”. Another nurse tried to find a vein for the IV, left a bruise.

7. Dad says he doesn’t understand how I can let anyone in close to my body now. I tell him I can’t but I tell him that kind of distance is heritable, has been etched into my bones; mom and sister and me, we have always only hugged goodbyes, I like it that way, learned to make every touch mean ‘Remember’ meaning ‘I am made of you’.

8. H called me a pill-bug, I was always curling around myself, I didn’t know how to make room for her.

9. If not skin, then, what marks the boundaries of a body? I say “you taught me about touch” but your fingerprints like scars, marking the places where I have healed.

10. The doctor told me I would need glasses soon. He’s told me that every year since I was eight. I had glasses once, they made seeing harder. The idea was to train the muscles, I imagined tiny biceps flexing behind my eyes.
11. I don’t trust doctors. Mom thinks they know everything. I make her wait outside now, otherwise she has too many questions, because she loves me, because she doesn’t trust me with myself.

12. I spend the whole summer running.

13. The first thing I heard when I woke up, the nurse said “It’s a shame, you’re so pretty,” then “your friend called everyone in the hospital. She wants to know that you’re ok”.

14. Katie says there are shadows in the corners of my eyes. We wonder if that’s where the scalpel went in.

15. She’s afraid to see the scars because I don’t curl up anymore. She tells me “I don’t even touch my own skin” I tell her “I understand” I tell her “it’s ok, to not know how to live in yourself” I tell her, even though most days I’m not sure I believe it but she tells me “you know, somehow, I just think everything would be different” I tell her “yeah, somehow”.

16. They never taught us how but we are drawing maps. First time she reached out for my hand we were surrounded by mud and woods, relearning together about these kinds of leaning, learning how to reach out.

17. They never taught us but I’m learning something about family, the kinds we build. Someone else’s sister brought kale to my front door, someone’s mom mailed apples across the country. My dad couldn’t look me in the eye.

18. They never taught us but I promise I’ll make you kale whenever you stop waiting, promise I’ll be there to put you back together

18. You’re in my joints I can’t do anything but hold you.
For Waking
by Sarah Abbott

I live a warm archive
histories in my movements
my body long and holding
and
I am regenerating

1.
for waking:
lean your hips toward
head arched gently
there are tiny animals curled in your back, sleeping

they dream:
some years there’s something not right and it’s in the mornings
only on the days I wake to thick deep snow
does it feel quiet
colors are brighter on a backdrop of clean
the street like a snow globe, contained
in the mornings when I am all my parts quiet
through the walls
I can hear the drift

2.
for waking:
ask,
am I here?
am I hungry?

3.
try again:
illness

4.
I am pinned by it
tethered by
stuck

5.
try again:
there are holes in what I know and I wonder sometimes if the memories got lost in my bloodstream, at what velocities they still move through me
6. here: a drift out to-
you are so far from grace-
filled up with so little

7. try again:
hard plastic bus seats, the 57 to the 66
numbers lodged in my head, tucked under sediments silty soiled,
the exhaust billowing early
the exhaust billowing frozen

8. where I’m from
there is as much summer corn as things I don’t know
in me are
opennesses wide like the flat land here
the land is flat here
gesturing out out out

9. try again:
bus seats mean bruised bones
and window frost to scratch away with thin(ned) nails
and the cold getting in your bones all day
deep in, crystals in the marrow
and all night
waiting for the thaw
but it is colder here than a 20 dollar space heater and wool socks can keep at bay

10. you tell me:
home is where you go to release something
unable to down our sorrows like cheap shots at the beginning,
our danced drinking, glittered bodies still hold
loss and
bear it through the energy stretched taught and expanding
finding ourselves upstairs half-holding limbs strewn again crumpled into each other
at the end of
middle of the night
we soft creatures
seeking re
generation
re
patriation to imagined homelands of wholeness
we will begin to climb

11.
in a moment in which we can feel ourselves emerge
someone asks
what have we been waiting for all this time?

12.
sometimes it feels too late, too much, to be coming together, to be opening out
but the night will only roll over into the next day and there we will be,
again
waiting for a chance to unfurl
looking for the space to be quiet
and to witness

and so sleep creeping into our muscles
and shadows creeping into our hollows
we stamp out a clearing in the thick

and in the dark
your telling draws me out
pulls my shoulders wide
remembering what I can’t always hold:
in you there are homes you can’t yet fathom
Untitled
by Indee Mitchell

My body tells stories of strong hands, of passionate hearts.
Of a love thicker than molasses, a touch warmer than the noon’s sun.
Fairytales of self-discovery, a lineage of pain and destruction
My body is an archive of coming to terms all over again...

It scares me that I cannot forget his face…because it’s mine.
I inherited his bones, his hair, his lies.

My father’s huge hands has fat sausage-link-like fingers,
Knuckles dipped in hair,
With 1. pointer that curved abnormally out of line at the tip: The story of a boy who shot himself with his father’s gun. He said: “I have to know how it feels before I can shoot another man.”

(I can never decide if you’re joking or not)

2. As far as I can remember, I wore my emotions on my sleeve.
You could always tell when I was upset:
Nose scrunched, lip poked
Bushy eyebrows almost touching.
I’d pout. When my father saw me in this physical state, he’d shove his rough stubbed fingers into my face: Vigorously “wiping the attitude off” he would say. I’d run off crying: Embarrassed and in pain.

3. Many times my mother told me to not worry and go to bed.
Face up I’d lie: writing fairytales in my head.

4. Age 8 or 9:
We had our first bad fight.
“You ain’t grown!” he snapped repeatedly
shoving me against the wall.
I cried myself to sleep (again) that night
Each breath of tear engraved the sharp sting of his finger digging into my chest.

5. I heard Mom say on the phone, “Sometimes, he doesn’t recognize his own strength.”

6.

7. Growing up ashamed, I hated the person they made me be…
8. One night, I spent hours in the bathroom shaving the hair from my body. I wanted to be new. Re-born into beauty. With every evidence of you removed. Cleansed—I wanted to not remember you anymore…

For waking: Arms reach far behind head, stretching spine to meet skull: perfectly curved. Moan and Release, finding the momentum to sit. Moan and Release. Sleepy fingers wake the face, knead the body, scratch yesterday off morning skin.

…Two days later I wake to scratching prickly arms. I’m constantly reminded that there’s no getting rid of you. Moan and Release.

9. Many times my mother told me to not worry and go to bed. Face up I’d lie, writing fairytales in my head.

My body tells stories of strong hands, of passionate hearts.
Of a love thicker than molasses, a touch warmer than the noon’s sun
Fairytales of self-discovery, a lineage of pain and destruction
My body is an archive of coming to terms all over again…
Memories of Flight
by Susanna Myrseth

Two.
Before I knew of anything called poetry
I was already a rememberer

I have always been
a renamer / a reframer extraordinaire
It started early: my first memory
of flying / of injury

One.
Daddy and me running to catch the ferry to Sausalito
No seatbelt on the baby in the stroller
Wheels hit the curb, child thrown free

My first memory of flying
like a dream
you wake up before you hit the ground

Three.
The work / the pain
each one a conversation

Three.
There isn’t any interesting way to talk about pain.
The word itself soaked in saccharine or medical jargon.

Due to its simplicity and lack of ambiguity,
the Basic Pain Inventory works well in initial assessments.
This test asks the patient to rate their pain on a scale from one to ten.
One is no pain, ten is described as “the worst pain you can imagine.”

I never say 10. I could always imagine worse.

Three.
I spend so much time trying to convince other people
that my body is not a bad place to live
and I feel like the worst kind of traitor when I don’t believe my own argument.

Four.
Who wants to hear it anyway?
Something hurts all the time

Often it’s the background noise
a hum that fades in and out
but sometimes
at least once most days
it’s the loudest thing in the room

My world gets so small
Just me and this animal
sharing my slight, strong body

We are stitched together tighter than anything
There will never be a person close enough to me to get between us

Five.
I don’t want any pity or concern

I don’t want to watch anyone start to think of me as someone brave
someone ennobled by suffering
I don’t want to hear about how well I manage this
How you’d never know to look at me

I don’t want to hear anyone ask
if I’ve tried voice-activated software
or acupuncture or going to a different doctor

I don’t want anyone to ask me if I’ll ever get better

I don’t want to watch you inch away
afraid of hurting me or just afraid.

‘Cause let’s be real: there’s only so long we can go on pretending
the pain isn’t there with us in the room.

Six.
Everyone moves around it differently.
We are always moving around it.

Six.
The damage has never been anything but present.
I have never been anything but whole.

Seven.
In remembering is an act of mending
Needle and thread deftness one of the last skills I lose
Even when my nerves misfire
Even when my body lies
I remember
mend and stitch each story into my skin
because every scrap is a promise that even if my body is like this always
pain cannot erase desire
damage cannot blunt beauty

Eight.
Where is my alternative to a narrative of recovery?
When I sit up in the night bargaining with my pain, what words fill the air?
What story keeps me company?

Nine.
The body lies, but it also remembers.

Ten.
I don’t need an answer,
I just need a conversation.

Ten.
So give it up
(The ghost of fear that bites your ankles)
Give it up
(The oldest hurt, curled like an animal against your breastbone)
Give it up
(The nagging doubts)
Give it up
(You must have brought this on yourself)
Give it up
(If you wanted to get better, you would)
Give it up
(It’s all in your head)
Give it up
(No one wants a broken body)
Give it up
(Not you, not anyone else)
Give it up
(You’re useless)
Give it up
Give it up
Give it up
Give it up
give it up to pain
Give it up to joy

Left standing is this body
Aine: The ligaments, the muscles

Sarah: The vessels, the blood

Susanna: The copper in the blood

A: The heat of it, the recall

Camara: The scars, a roadmap

Indee: I demand ownership of my body, ownership of my own skin

SA: The fingers, the wrists

SM: The note each joint hums to the other

I: Each black hair that regrows on knuckles and toes, on the backsides of my thighs

C: The air whistling in the lungs

SM: The pull and release of the diaphragm

A: The forearms

SA: The shoulders

I: The face-up palms

C: The jawbone, the lifelines

A: The tendons, the clavicle

SM: The span of it, birdlike, the wings