

Queer Crip Writings

1. Disability and desire: journey of a filmmaker

Shelly Barry

In 1996, at the age of 24, I found myself in hospital, with empty walls and broken dreams colouring my days. My partner at the time, Janine Clayton, and I were caught up in local taxi violence in Cape Town, South Africa, with members of rival taxi organisations firing at each other. The driver of the taxi we were in died, and my spine was severed by a bullet. My body told me long before doctors had the courage to admit it. I was paralysed from the chest down. During those endless afternoons with little else than my mind to entertain me, I contemplated the extent of my loss. Perhaps what struck me deepest at the time was my conviction that I would never be desired or loved again. I felt that my body had become damaged goods, my sexuality erased.

As time went by, I began to dismantle my perceptions by analysing their origins. I recognised that my mental picture of a person with a disability was that of someone in need of care, someone to be pitied, someone who certainly had no real claim to love or any kind of fulfilling life. The basis of my beliefs was largely informed by society's consensus on people with disabilities ... these were people who were mostly invisible, unless as beggars on the street or patients in hospital. The reflection of this invisibility was entrenched by the media.

My political consciousness grew within the disability rights movement. I began to acknowledge that it was society that had placed my body in a box with a label and stuck it away on a dusty shelf. I had a different body, yes. Not a damaged one. The process of reclaiming my body was an exceptionally powerful and liberating experience. I understood desire and sensuality from a completely different perspective. I realised that passion is something that everyone can access (it is not reserved for the young and the able-bodied), and it can suffuse through every aspect of our lives. I recognised the importance of self-love as opposed to requiring affirmation from others in order to love myself.

I felt pride. I even dared to feel beautiful. I cruised around on my wheels feeling that I had every right to be in the world, as much as anyone else did. And I began to live with a passion and fervour that fundamentally changed the course of my life.

Shelly Barry is a South African film-maker, writer and activist.

Full article at: <http://www.feministafrica.org/index.php/disability-and-desire>

2a. Dreaming Sins, Crippling Sex: Talking to Sins Invalid

by *Virgie Tovar on April 6, 2011*

http://nsrc.sfsu.edu/article/dreaming_sins_crippling_sex_talking_sins_invalid

Patty Berne from Sins Invalid (a activist performance collective in USA)

...with Sins, many of us now have an opportunity to explore what is sexy for *us*. I'm really psyched because this year we're talking about crippling sex. So, for example, one performer, Maria Palacios, is doing a piece about loving her body and about the parts of her body that she thought were not acceptable. She's talking about the "magic aces" of her breasts with able-bodied lovers, trying to distract them from her legs, and at the same time she sets limits to what she'll allow people access to. And

in the next piece she's performing we partnered with Sean Dorsey (Fresh Meat Productions) and we did this entire strip that's based on her legs. It's really exciting. So, the idea of crippling sex is embodying how we are sexual in our crip bodies, not mimicking able-bodiedness or normative standards. It's not in spite of our being non-normative, it is *because* of non-normativity that we're hot. Because if we can embody all that, how much power must we have? And as we all know power – at the end of the day – is pretty fucking sexy.

<http://www.sinsinvalid.org/> - A great queer crip performance organisation.

2b. Challenging Our Differences: A Interview with Eli Clare

By **Cory Silverberg**, About.com Guide

Qu: A lot of people seem to get hung up on using the “right” words to describe others to the point where they are too afraid or too annoyed to try and make a connection at all. How do you deal with this kind of thing?

A: I find people struggle with bodily difference, whether it's disability or queer sexuality or gender variance/transness or skin color or being fat. In a culture that scorns, hates, pities, tries to cure and/or pretends not to notice those differences, naming, claiming and embracing them as ordinary parts of human experience is a huge challenge.

The words *queer*, *trans*, *disability*, among others, insist that folks acknowledge, rather than deflect or erase, the reality of bodily difference. Dominant cultural responses, ranging from murder to bullying to medical pathologizing to segregation of many different kinds, simply have to change. And so when heterosexual people squirm with the naming of queer sexuality or nondisabled people would rather not listen to the disability experience, I ask, Why are you uncomfortable and what can that discomfort teach you?

Qu: What do you think it can teach us?

A: I think discomforts mark places to which we all need to pay attention. It might flag fear or privilege or lack of knowledge or lack of familiarity. In my work I ask folks to follow their discomfort into the unfamiliar, which may seem like the last thing any of us want to do. But unlearning oppression, stereotypes and prejudice means exactly that, moving into the unknown. Mostly I trust that if we pay attention to our discomfort and if we're willing to do political, emotional, analytic and spiritual work around that feeling, it will transform into knowledge, strength and alliance.

Qu: On this website I get a lot of e-mails from people who feel so “different” that they believe they simply aren't sexual at all. What do you say to someone who isn't just feeling a bit down about themselves but has basically given up altogether on being sexual and having a sex life?

A: The many ways in which marginalization around race, class, disability, sexual orientation and gender translates into sexual shame and damage are profound. The lies abound, casting disabled people as completely asexual and queer people as perverts, African-American men as sexual predators and poor women as sexually irresponsible, and on and on. And mainstream media has all of us, regardless of identity, comparing our bodies and desires to impossible, air-brushed representations of who we should be as sexual beings.

How to resist the shame, damage, pure thievery -- our bodies stolen away from us -- is such a necessary and difficult question. In response, I try to offer community: you're not alone nor is your experience only isolated and individual. I try to shape a body politic that holds complexity and contradiction, that doesn't assume a straightforward trajectory from body shame to body love. I try to create space through

words, images, dialogue that embraces bodily difference. I try to model ways of thinking and being in community that don't forget our bodies. And none of these responses ever feel sufficient.

Updated May 25, 2008

http://sexuality.about.com/od/sexpeopleprofiles/a/eli_clare.htm

'Eli Clare weaves hope, critical analysis, and compassionate storytelling together in his work on disability and queerness, insisting on the twine of race, class, gender, sexuality, and disability.' At Eliclare.com

3. Leaving Evidence by Mia Mingus

<http://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2012/05/08/feeling-the-weight-some-beginning-notes-on-disability-access-and-love/#comments>

Feeling the Weight: Some Beginning Notes on Disability, Access and Love

This is a beginning; a dive into waters that I swim every day, but have been taught not to speak about. I struggle with how to talk about love out loud in a way that holds access and doesn't diminish love in all its glory, but instead illuminates how ableism twists and threatens love and relationships. Needing to constantly negotiate access for my physical disability within all my relationships in an ableist world has shaped the kind of connection and love I am able to have. I have been scared to open up the Pandora's box that holds the intimacies of ableism. Scared to talk about some of the deepest parts of what disability has meant in my life.

Most days I feel like access and love are like oil and water. I wonder how the two can possibly coexist. I am speaking of love broadly, meaning any relationship where there is love, whether that is between friends, lovers, family members (chosen, birth, situational), community members, etc. As a queer disabled woman of color adoptee, I am questioning the very fabric that makes up love and, in particular, disabled people's access to love—or, rather, the kinds of love (and relationships) that disabled people have access to. How can disabled people who rely on our loved ones for daily access be our whole selves when that threatens the relationships our access and survival depends on? And how can this support genuine, deep, loving relationships?

The activist-dreamer-revolutionary part of me believes that access and love don't have to be separate. It is the part of me that is committed to revolutionary love, radical love, or whatever it's being called these days. It lives off of the idea that somehow, if we work hard enough at this thing called liberation, our lives will be different: institutions, relationships and all.

But my life has proven different. My lived experience has left me holding one half of my heart in each hand, one for access and one for love, crushed. I have found myself on cold windy cliffs, staring at the canyon between the two.

I have watched ableism tear apart relationships with people I love. I have seen access be too much of a barrier for people to be in relationship with each other. I have made excuses for inaccessibility because I loved people and didn't want to lose relationship with them. I have excused racism, sexism, violence, homophobia because I didn't want to, couldn't afford to, lose access. I have asked for access or

raised ableism in relationships, only to have those relationships end abruptly. I have stayed in relationships for access and I have been too afraid to enter into relationships because of access. I have had access held over my head, leveraged for able-bodied supremacist means, or treated like a reward for good behavior. I have had access made invisible or belittled by loved ones; I have had to make access happen so the person providing access didn't know they were. I have kept parts of myself from people I love because I was afraid to, didn't know how to, be whole and complex in the context of needing access.

This is the cruelty of ableism: it robs us from each other. This is the weight of access. This is what gets said in whispers, not on the microphone and at the panel. This is what gets shared in a fleeting glance between us, disabled, sick, crip folks; a recognition, a silent sigh, an unfocused stare. This is what we don't share, don't know how to share, because it is so instinctual, so ground-level, so what's-the-point-it's-never-going-to-change. This is the air I've breathed since I can remember, as a disabled child, never knowing it could be any different—never having been able bodied.

The weight of inaccessibility is not logistical. It is not just about ramps, ASL interpreters, straws and elevators. It is a shifting, changing wall—an ocean—between you and I. It is just as much feeling and trauma as it is material and concrete. It is something felt, not just talked about. It is made up of isolation from another night at home while everyone else goes to the party. The fear of being left by the people you love and who are supposed to love you. The pain of staring or passing, the sting of disappointment, the exhaustion of having the same conversations over and over again. The throbbing foolishness of getting your hopes up and the shrinking of yourself in order to maintain. It is an echoing loneliness; part shame, part guilt, part constant apology and thank you. It is knowing that no matter how the conditions around me change, my body will still not be able to do certain things—it will still need other people, it will still signal dependence, it will still be disabled.

At 30, I have experienced many different kinds of beautiful love, largely because I have had the privilege of not being locked away in an institution, group home or my family's back room like many disabled people. And indeed, to question the love I have been honored to experience on this page is terrifying and puts my current relationships, love and access at risk. But these are the parts of disability justice and liberation that keep me up at night, that have hurt more than any ableist remark, that have left more scars than any surgery. This is the underbelly of ableism. This is *what I fear we will be left to wrestle with after every building is made accessible and every important policy is passed. This is what I desire as a queer disabled woman of color adoptee: to be able to love and not have access used as a weapon, and to be able to have access without the fear of losing love.

4. The Poetry of Jim Ferris

One of the great achievements and attractions of Jim's work in my opinion, is how each poem is seeped through in disability experience. If asked to identify work which is quintessentially crip culture, as well as retaining its own singularity and identity, I would immediately point to Jim Ferris's work. His wry humour, his extraordinary communication skills, the knowledge of bone-pain from deep within the marrow and his ability to translate that into sublime language all – regardless of impairment or not – can understand is why he should be better known outside his native US.

In Slouching Towards Guantanamo, Jim Ferris continues to challenge the way we have all learned to think about disability and people with disabilities. These splendid poems navigate between the light touch of tender irony and the arresting perspective disabled bodies can offer our common understandings.

–Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Staring: How We Look*

Jim's poetry epitomises the shift in perception which great work can achieve. As Terry Galloway ('*Mean Little deaf Queer*') coined it, when analysing Jim's poem '*Poem with disabilities*':

"This poem, like so many others in this heartfelt and expressive compilation, exhorts us, beguiles us, charms us; and suddenly, as we're reading along—just as he promises— our "angle of vision jumps" and our "entrails aren't where we left them." A precise and eloquent unraveling of life's knottier complexities."

I give you Jim Ferris.

Poet of Cripples

Let me be a poet of cripples,
of hollow men and boys groping
to be whole, of girls limping toward
womanhood and women reaching back,
all slipping and falling toward the cavern
we carry within, our hidden void,
a place for each to become full, whole,
room of our own, space to grow in ways
unimaginable to the straight
and the narrow, the small and similar,
the poor, normal ones who do not know
their poverty. Look with care, look deep.
Know that you are a cripple too.
I sing for cripples; I sing for you.

(c) Jim Ferris

Reproduced from <http://www.mainstreetrag.com/JFerris.html>

Poems with Disabilities

by Jim Ferris

I'm sorry -- this space is reserved
for poems with disabilities. I know
it's one of the best spaces in the book,
but the Poems with Disabilities Act
requires us to make all reasonable
accommodations for poems that aren't
normal. There is a nice space just
a few pages over -- in fact (don't
tell anyone) I think it's better
than this one, I myself prefer it.
Actually I don't see any of those
poems right now myself, but you never know
when one might show up, so we have to keep

this space open. You can't always tell
just from looking at them, either. Sometimes
they'll look just like a regular poem
when they roll in -- you're reading along
and suddenly everything
changes, the world tilts
a little, angle of vision
jumps, focus
shifts. You remember
your aunt died of cancer at just your age
and maybe yesterday's twinge means
something after all. Your sloppy,
fragile heart beats
a little faster
and then you know.
You just know.
And the poem
is right
where it
belongs.

(c) Jim Ferris

<http://www.raggededgemagazine.com/0300/b0300poem.htm>

The Ragged Edge