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Crip Pessimism: The Language of Dis/ability and the Culture that Isn't

Michael L. Selck

Southern Illinois University Carbondale, mls6991@siu.edu

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CRIP-PESSIMISM: THE LANGUAGE OF DIS/ABILITY AND THE CULTURAL IDENTITY
THAT ISN'T

By

Michael L. Selck

B.S., Southern Illinois University – Carbondale, 2013

A Research Paper
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Master of Arts

Department of Communication Studies
in the Graduate School
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
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RESEARCH PAPER APPROVAL

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A Research Paper Submitted in Partial
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Approved by:

Dr. Nathan Stucky, Chair

Dr. Todd Graham

Graduate School
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
August 14, 2015

DEDICATION

For my pops, I'm rolling in your shoes.

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INTRODUCTION

The disabled are dying and with them dis/abled culture is being eradicated. In the time between formulating this project and its completion already too many disabled souls have been taken from this world, including pivotal disability studies influences for this research. I barely had enough time to mourn the loss of disability advocate and inspiration porn critic Stella Young before grieving the loss of disability studies exemplar Tobin Siebers. Attached to the grief I feel as a result of the fading disability studies community is the perpetual grief I harbor since my disabled Father's suicide and in turn the grief concomitant to the claiming of a disabled identity. I choose to start out this project with grief because it communicates the tenor of this research; this is not the disability studies project of inspiration or utopia. My entry point to the disability studies dialogue is riddled with grief, anger, and pain and it is as such that this project plots a course of disability research that attempts to make a space free from the ideological constraints of optimism.

The language surrounding dis/ability is highly political. Entire words, phrases, and identities are stretched between, in, and out of the nexus of dis/ability. The choice, for instance, to include a backslash in the word dis/ability represents for Goodley (2014) a desire to delineate and expand each of the categories in the face of global neoliberalism. My initial research inquired about the impact of dis/abled terms and phrases. I went to interrogate rhetoric like "special education", "handicapable", and one of the most glaringly overused insults in the American education system "retard". The scholarship I was coming up with was plentiful but was for the most part located entirely outside of intercultural communication programs like the one I was attending. For the most part the few and far between intercultural communication projects about dis/ability I was able to locate were

without modal complexity and didn't bear semblance to so many of my own experiences. I was beginning to notice a layer of optimism that has been communicatively imprinted upon the negotiation of dis/abled identity. The angst started to manifest as I questioned if I was in the correct field or if dis/ability even was 'cultural'. I felt a very real cultural erasure of dis/ability in academia and ultimately that glaring lack of consideration is what pushed me to performance studies. I first worked to close the apparent research gap by crafting a collaborative performance titled *Under the Mantle (UTM)*, which put dis/ability, communication scholarship, and pessimist philosophy on stage. The larger purpose of this research report is to antagonize the erasure of dis/ability from communication studies by autoethnographically analyzing the crip-pessimist performance art project *Under The Mantle*.

This research report will first detail the components of the theoretical work that was drawn on to create *UTM*. Next I offer a literature review to demonstrate the combination of optimism and neglect dis/ability has undergone in intercultural communication models. Following that section I mark my shift to performance methods as I explain how narrative autoethnography can illuminate cultural misconceptions regarding the dis/abled. In the last sections of this report I offer a textual analysis of the performance *UTM* and analyze three significant arguments of the instillation before concluding.

Contextualizing Critical Dis/Ability Theory

Often used interchangeably, critical disability theory (CDT) and critical disability studies (CDS) contest dis/ablism (Goodley, 2011, 2014; Devlin & Pothier, 2006; Hosking, 2008). There are several unique additions made to CDS with every new instantiation. Scholars in European countries and Canada attend to the theory, with United States academics often underrepresented. There are three concurrent themes of CDT that I will synthesize in this section with some dis/ability studies authors claiming there are as many as seven themes of CDT (Hosking, 2008). In the introduction to their edited collection of dis/ability essays, Richard Devlin and Dianne Pothier (2006) present three themes of CDT as,

first, to highlight the unequal status to which persons with disabilities are confined; *second*, to destabilize necessitarian assumptions that reinforce the marginalization of persons with disabilities; and *third*, to help generate the individual and collective practical agency of persons with disabilities in the struggles for recognition and redistribution. (p. 18, emphasis mine)

Already the connections between the CDT and the critical communication paradigm are visible as each respectively forefronts notions of power, privilege, identity, and agency.

Outlined in more detail, the first theme of CDT argues that there is systemic micro and macro level discrimination against bodies with disabilities. To some critical communication scholars, this theme might be obvious, but it seldom is when “the resulting exclusion of those who do not fit able-bodied norms may not be noticeable or even intelligible” (Devlin & Pothier, 2006, p. 7). As the bumper sticker on my laptop proudly disclaims, “Not all disabilities are visible,” which necessarily adds a level of nuance and

complexity to the way that dis/ability studies attend to the prospect of discrimination and violence. Often times, “social organization according to able-bodied norms is just taken as natural, normal, inevitable, necessary, even progress” (Devlin & Pothier, 2006, p. 7). It might be true that the lack of collaborative work between critical communication studies and dis/ability studies is because neoliberalism is supremely effective at rebranding marginalized oppression as a marker of its progress. The implications of this assertion are dire but essential to the basis of crip-pessimism. Theoretical approaches based in pessimism and skepticism are often necessary to distinguish the instruments of self destruction that have been mistaken for those of self betterment.

Thus, a key question remains, what is regarded as progress and to whom does it count? The politics of progress call for the second tenet of CDT, which is a destabilization of neoliberal practices that strip power and agency from bodies with disabilities. Devlin and Pothier (2006) use the language of “anti-necessitarian” (p. 2), which refers to the efficacy of social organizations and an unflinching skepticism of liberalism. For Shildrick and Price (1999), “disabled bodies call into question the ‘givenness’ of the ‘natural body’ and, instead, posit a corporeality that is fluid in its investments and meanings” (p. 1). Anti-necessitarian logics ask questions that remain innocuous to the critical communication paradigm. Can the architectural proliferation of stairs and multiple levels on buildings be attributed to neoliberalism and active disablism? If stairs seem to focus too exclusively on physical impairments, then what about the sensitivity of the building’s lighting, acoustics, and spatiality? Finally, if neoliberalism fights to protect its grand narrative of progress then is the social exclusion of bodies with disabilities necessary for the day-to-day operation of our globalized world? As Donaldson (2002) posits: “theories of gendered, raced, sexed, classed,

and disabled bodies offer us critical languages for ‘denaturalising’ impairment” (p. 112) at the level of the subjective and inter-subjective.

The third theme of CDT is to attend to the agency of bodies with disabilities in the struggle for recognition. One key element of extending agency to the disabled is the use of social experience. Experience is subjective “but experience remains intimately connected to political and social existence, and therefore individuals and societies are capable of learning from their experiences” (Siebers, 2008, p. 82). Though absolutely necessary, it is not enough to write treatises on the oppression of the disabled over time. Academics, theorists, intercultural trainers, and storytellers alike should be aware of the constant risks of representation. Representation and context are at the core of critical disability studies. The notion of agency is as unstable as the notions of dis/ability. There is no one-size-fits-all human rights based approach that will be suitable to address all disabled experiences, as the theoretical call for crip-pessimism will remind us. Instead of a universal abstract Rawlsian concept of social justice, CDS “attend(s) to the relational components of dis/ablism” (Goodley, 2011, p. 159). By a Rawlsian concept of social justice I mean a model that relies on distributive justice with utopist equality at its core. Where utopist equality projects highlight human sameness to the point of purity. CDT unavoidably invites a discussion about difference into the folds as postmodern and post-structural thinkers position the self as defined constantly in relation to others. Therein lies the difference between an equality model and a justice model of social identity. Often in the attempt to open up spaces for reconsidering self and other, CDS celebrates disability as a positive identity marker. This essay offers a strong argument of caution that the inclusion of CDS in critical communication studies might rely too heavily on celebrations of disabled identity.

Nothing better demonstrates that reliance on celebrating identity than the myriad language choices used to describe a disabled identity including: differently-abled, special needs, person with disability, disabled person, temporarily able-bodied, and others. Often, able-bodied audiences have a tendency to sensationalize the presence of disability in a space that has not traditionally welcomed it. Examples of this are highlighted by the increasingly popular discussion of 'inspiration porn' (Young, 2014) and Hollywood's representation of disability. The tendency is to inspirationalize the disabled for achieving tasks that would not be celebrated if they were accomplished by an unimpaired body. Crossing the street, showing up on time, entering a building by oneself are all tasks profoundly routine to the non-disabled and yet simultaneously cherished as markers of progress for the disabled. Philosophical pessimism is articulated next as a way to temper the risk of sensationalizing dis/ability. The theories ultimately fuse together like orchids and wasps to generate the larger theme of crip-pessimism.

Philosophical Pessimism

Throughout the 19th century pessimism was one of the most popular intellectual and philosophical strains, crossing countries and continents. Authors such as Rousseau, Leopardi, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche overwhelmingly created and lead the spirit of pessimism. Contemporarily however, the word 'pessimism' is pejorative and describes a body's emotional discontent rather than intellectual engagement with the world. Dienstag (2009) writes, "Since pessimism is perceived more as a disposition than as a theory, pessimists are seen primarily as dissenters from whatever the prevailing consensus of their time happens to be, rather than as constituting a continuous alternative" (p. 3). Power is responsible for ontological shifts, and during shifts some populations benefit while others

are harmed. The turn in thinking about pessimism from an intellectual position to an emotional state has been particularly gratuitous for bodies with disabilities. I come to pessimism because of my experience with disability. My anxiety disorder comes with an exteriority of anti-social behavior that has branded me pessimistic. The concern for my anxiety in public situations is often commented on as overly critical, negative, narcissistic, and most often pessimistic. I experience an anxious state of becoming different, and after years of failing to rehabilitate my sameness to able-bodied standards, I have come to a comfort with pessimism.

I choose to include pessimism as a theoretical crutch to avoid communication studies' sensationalism of disability. I imagine that when critical communication studies does bridge the dis/ability research gap that it might, at least initially, extend some neoliberal logics at the expense of CDS. This might manifest by scholars simply asserting disabled personhood where it does not institutionally, culturally, or individually exist. I find that CDT and philosophical pessimism combine in unique and valuable ways, particularly around tensions of personhood, abstract ideal humanism, and neoliberalism. Neoliberalism should be understood as "the superiority of individualized, market-based competition over other modes of organization. This basic principle is the hallmark of neo-liberal thought—one with old roots that lay partly in Anglo economics and partly in German schools of liberalism" (Mudge, 2008, p. 706-707). There are four components of pessimism outlined by Joshua Foa Dienstag (2006) in his book *Pessimism: Philosophy, Ethic, Spirit* that I wish to explore difference through. They are as following that: (1) time is a burden, (2) history is ironic, (3) human existence is absurd, and finally (4) resignation or affirmation.

To write about pessimism necessarily involves questions of time, temporality, and history. The development of philosophical pessimism, specifically, the theories regarding the burden of time-consciousness, begins with difference. For the pessimist, the concept of time begets a differentiation between human and animal. Being a dog-owner myself, I have heard the colloquial aphorism that dogs, as all animals, have no concept of time. Pessimists understand time consciousness as a unique, but ultimately loathsome, trait of the human condition. Even in projects that appear to be geared toward sameness there are always unperceived and neglected populations. For example, even the U.S. constitution alleges persons of color were (and still are often) racially subjugated as property instead of considered to be fully human. The notion of difference is at the center of the pessimist's position on time-consciousness because the philosophy accepts that the conditions of our existence are subject to relentless unpredictable change. "To the pessimists, however, the human condition is existentially unique— its uniqueness consisting precisely in the capacity for time-consciousness" (Dienstag, 2009, p. 20). For the pessimist nothing is ever the same, everything is always different, and to inhabit linear time means that everything in existence is always rushing off into the past.

The advent of human time consciousness is also what leads the pessimist to find the course of history to be ironic. History is ironic for the pessimist because progress is always related to a greater set of unperceived consequences. As suggested above, philosophical pessimism acknowledges that change occurs; technologies develop and improve over time. Pessimists ask if those improvements are related to a greater set of costs that are not immediately recognizable. (Dienstag, 2006, p. 25) Similar to critical disability theory, pessimism interrogates power and privilege. Pessimists rely on the logic of difference to

chart consequences. Consequences go unperceived because they occur across populations with disproportionate access to power, populations that are often culturally unintelligible. For instance, the massive boom in mobile technologies like cell phones and laptops has created vast pits of 'e-waste' in Africa, surges in child labor, and conflict over rare earth minerals (Vidal, 2013). Pessimists use difference to tease out the distinction between the instruments of suffering and those of betterment.

The third philosophical pessimistic position is that human existence is absurd. The absurdity of existence "is illustrated by the persistent mismatch between human purposes and the means available to achieve them: or again, between our desire for happiness and our capacity to encounter or sustain it" (Dienstag, 2006, p. 32). Difference is built upon examinations of power, which is both fluid and transferable but ultimately permanent. Classical western philosophy has an optimistic pragmatism built into it that posits there must be an answer to our questions. Alternatively, the pessimist embraces uncertainty, ambiguity, and intersubjectivity. Pessimism encourages a sense of comfort around the idea of multiple, coexistent, and perhaps competing histories. Neoliberal optimism is the logic of conflict as materially reconcilable, rather than antagonistically irreconcilable.

The fourth and final tenet of pessimism that we are to examine asks what we are to do about our dire human condition. There are multiplicities of rationales that ultimately inform the pessimistic dualism to either resign from life or affirm it entirely. I defer to an existential or Nietzschean pessimism that recognizes suffering is inevitable for two reasons. First, human time-consciousness necessitates an awareness of our impending death. Second, mutually assured value systems will always intersubjectively exist. The choice to affirm life in its entirety is a pessimistic choice. Embracing life as both miserable

and beautiful, fleeting and enduring, validates the perpetually fragmented subject seeking a world that exists beyond good and evil and instead just is.

LITERATURE REVIEW

To rummage around intercultural communication journals for articles describing the communicative domain of bodies with disabilities might lead one to conclude that contemporary Western communication academics do not understand disability as a culture. This is troubling because intercultural communication as a discipline is necessarily concerned with the complexities, interactions, and nuances of identities and social groups. As early as 2002 questions about a dis/abled culture have arisen as Steven Brown comments that, ""The existence of a disability culture is a relatively new and contested idea. Not surprising, perhaps, for a group that has long been described with terms like "invalid," "impaired," "limited," "crippled," and so forth"" (35). In fact, Brown (2002) continues by suggesting that, "Scholars would be hard-pressed to discover terms of hope, endearment or ability associated with people with disabilities" (35). In this section I will review a litany of intercultural communication texts to demonstrate that while research on dis/abled culture is still woefully unapparent the tenor of that research, contrary to Brown's (2002) assertion, has shifted exclusively to terms of hope, endearment, and ability.

After six consecutive years of higher education at a tier-one research institution with a penchant for critical communication scholarship, I have accumulated stacks of syllabi that are grimly unaware and/or unconcerned with dis/ability and communication. When intercultural communication does attend to questions of dis/ability it does so without modal complexity and often, intentionally or not, situates disability within the optimistic rubric of conflict. Being within the rubric of conflict means that the structural positions of the abled/disabled are understood as complimentary, instead of antithetical, which is the rubric of antagonism. There are three themes that I have found that are

emblematic of disability research represented through the rubric of conflict. Conflict themes include: First, if the text was written for the abled, particularly as a type of instruction manual that teaches them how to recognize their privilege. Second, if the text includes a disabled subjectivity but does not call for a paradigm shift. The third theme I found is that a complete erasure of disability from a text is also complacency within the rubric of conflict as the text imposes a mythic equality across all human identities.

Cumulatively I use these three themes to parse through extant research about disability in intercultural communication. My hope was that after dissecting this body of literature what remained would be a set of journal articles that made sense of the value of disabled antagonism.

Given that this essay will start by invoking Thomas Kuhn it seems perfectly appropriate that the first text that opens up this literature review is a handbook. As Kuhn argues in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962),

When the individual scientist can take a paradigm for granted, [s]he need no longer, in his[/her] major works, attempt to build his field anew, starting from first principles and justifying the use of each concept introduced. That can be left to the writer of textbooks. (p. 19)

There is a standardization of the expectations of communication studies in our textbooks. *The Handbook of Critical Intercultural Communication* (2013) marks my entry into the discussion of the literature of critical intercultural communication. I begin with a textbook because as Kuhn suggests they are the places that paradigms are taken for granted, the major works and principles of the discipline have been taken into consideration. I embark on the journey to review the literature of the intercultural communication pessimistically,

meaning that I really went into this not expecting much. Despite my lack of specific engagement with every intercultural text, I already have a sense of the way disability was regarded in the field. It wasn't. Searching for the term "disability" in the handbook confirmed some of my pessimism as the term itself only appears 15 times, including citations, tables of contents, and titles. Searching for the term "ableism" generated 3 results and "disablism" did not appear at all. Conversely, the term "ability" shows up 51 times, which is a good reminder of the audience this handbook expects. For comparison with another socially constructed identity, the term "race" shows up 119 times in the handbook.

Of particular interest in the *Handbook of Critical Intercultural Communication* (2013) is Deanna Fassett's chapter titled "Critical Reflections on a Pedagogy of Ability" (461-471). Fassett begins by arguing, "Though our work is rich and nuanced, critical intercultural communication scholars have left questions of ability and disability largely overlooked and undertheorized" (p.461). Being the only chapter in the larger handbook that makes citations of prominent disability studies texts, it is clear her argument still rings depressingly true. Unfortunately for me Fassett does not do a review of existing intercultural literature regarding disability, perhaps because she encountered the same absence I am currently encountering in 2015. It is unsurprising then that the article itself does not attempt to break out of the mold of the rubric of conflict. Although Fassett's (2013) chapter overcomes the third theme of erasure by including disability as its foundation it still links to the first two themes because it is primarily a reflection on ability which makes it very parallel to being written for the abled. Secondly the reflection on ability, which is at best an invitation, does not call for a paradigm shift, which suggests that disabled subjectivities are compatible within the current framework.

Before moving on to some journals that contribute to the field of intercultural communication I wanted to highlight another popular intercultural textbook titled *Identity Research and Communication: Intercultural Reflections and Future Directions* (2012) edited by Nilanjana Bardhan and Mark P. Orbe. I find the text important to include first because it features some of the most prolific authors in contemporary intercultural communication, but secondarily I choose the text to really demonstrate the absence of disability from research. In a complete search of the text the term “disability” appears once. Ironically the recitation comes from Keith Berry’s (2012) chapter titled “(Un)covering the Gay Interculturalist” (p. 223-236) in a section referencing how Franklin Roosevelt often had his disability ignored. The book as a whole can be said to represent all three themes I identify as part of the rubric of conflict. Most significantly this collection of essays clings to the third theme of the conflict rubric, which is the strategic erasure of the language of disability from its content. In clinging to the doctrine of disinterest surrounding disability the text can contribute to a sense of mythically equitable ‘human’ identity, which is problematic because as my introduction notes the disabled occupy an antagonistic relationships with assertions of ideal abstract humanity.

Next I want to turn to some intercultural communication journals that I suspected might be more actively publishing texts about disability because they are more up to date and draw from a wider pool of contributors. To begin I first examined all issues of the *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication*, which begin in 2008 with the creation of the journal. Drawing on seven volumes of the publication from 2008 to 2014, I used the critical search term “disability” and found nine articles. The term “disability” was not present in any of the titles of the associated articles, only embedded in the content of

the texts themselves. Of those nine articles none utilize disability studies scholarship with the exception of Gust A. Yep's article titled, "Queering/Quaring/Kauering/Crippin'/Transing "Other Bodies" in Intercultural Communication" (2013). As the theme of crip-pessimism has no doubt already suggested often times the language of "crip" or in this case "crippin" is a moniker of disability studies research parallel to McRuer's *Crip Theory* (2006). Yep's (2013) article mentions "disability" one time without citations going on to proclaim that while crippin' represents a substantial body of research, "these studies have been mostly outside of the communication discipline" (p. 120). Yep's article, and the grander journal from which it is published still seem committed to placing disability within the rubric of conflict.

Finally I considered that part of the problem that I was having in collecting disability literature in intercultural communication might be that I was not looking back far enough in the history of the discipline. I accounted for this by next examining the *Howard Journal of Communications*, which has been in existence since 1988. Although this journal marks ethnicity and communication as its aim, Crenshaw's (1991) intersectionality seems to be a pretty good argument for why race and ethnicity are always already simultaneously converged with disability. Maintaining the most rudimentary of search terms; "disability", "ableism", "disablism" I turned to the publications 25 volumes. The term "disability" hit 44 times with one marked explicitly in the title. Okay, I thought. Now we are really getting somewhere! I remember thinking how absurd my optimism was though. How likely was it of these 44 hits disability was going to be not only be regarded, but then also considered antagonistically? Not so likely, apparently. I started reviewing the most topical article, "Should We Laugh or Should We Cry? John Callahan's Humor as a Tool to Change Societal

Attitudes Toward Disability” by Kara Shultz and Darla Germeroth in 1998. In this article the first thing that struck me is that there was a pretty explicit charge that societal attitudes toward the disabled should change. I can imagine the confusion that dominant audiences in 2014 would have, by merely suggesting that the general social attitude toward disability should change. The article calls into question what the apparently ‘typical’ or rational persons response should be to a political cartoonists work representing disability. By asserting this sort of abstract ideal humans reaction to cartoonish lampoons of disability the article has a case for both participating in the conflict rubric, and representing the antagonistic structure of dis/human. It is the worldview of the article that participates in the rubric of conflict, by arguing that humor will transform a fundamental and societal hatred and fear of the disabled. It is the worldview that the article puts on display though that I was really interested in, the worldview that was being displayed was one where U.S. American society could not figure out how even comprehend disability, so as to *then* have an emotion regarding it. The register of human emotions could not index disability; it was being displayed as incommensurable with humanity. I knew then I was not going to find anything in those other 43 hits, and sure enough. I was right.

Finally I turned to the *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research* taking its name in 2006. Same search terms and this time “disability” had seven associated articles but with zero in the title. I noticed “diabetes” mentioned from one of the articles, which is fully titled, “A World of Difference: Unraveling the Conversations African American Mothers Have with Their Adult Daughters to Negotiate Diabetes” (Cooke-Jackson, 2011) and I decided to start there. It was an interesting article but it was clear that it wasn’t

considering a critical paradigm of disability. The models of disability utilized were very much psycho-behavioral, which locates them squarely in the rubric of conflict.

I reviewed a text I constructed out of five components, two books and three entire journals. In that text I traced themes of conflict and antagonism as a way to discern the presence and absence of disability in the field of intercultural communication. It all began when I asked my instructor, Dr. Rachel Griffin, a tough question. Feeling frustrated I asked her how to review the dis/ability literature that barely seemed to exist. She shared with me plenty of tips on how to craft my own assortment of literature. At the end of it she let out an encouraging sigh that said as a biracial black and white woman she had encountered this question and isolation before. That thought was revelatory for me because it suggested that still, no matter how much more “race and ethnicity” appeared in those intercultural texts compared to “disability”, that the conversation about race and ethnicity in intercultural communication should not be considered more complete or in any way finished. Obviously the same realization is true for the studies of gender, sexuality, nationality, and class. It is important I realized in the process of reviewing the literature that the dis/abled antagonism needs to be characterized precisely, so it is never interpreted as existing in opposition to the extant identity research.

METHODOLOGY AND FRAMEWORK

Autoethnography has become a central and integral part of my disability studies library. Many of the texts I find myself recommending as of late all contain autobiographical as well as reflexive culturally systemic components, which are two fundamental characteristics of autoethnography. I understand autoethnography as characteristically vital to the study of disability because historically the disabled subject has been excluded from academia in content and in body. The rich affective stories and the disabling societal prejudice still existed but they were regarded as merely personal instead of political. Autoethnography “is an expression of the desire to turn social science inquiry into a non-alienating practice” (Bochner, 2013, 53). The narrative turn is responsible for shedding light on the areas of our lives that are political, even though they do not appear so, or are not regarded as much. The metaphor of light has been used before to describe autoethnography as Chang (2008) writes, “it (autoethnography) is about holding collected (or written) fragments of life against the present light and making sense of their significance within the bigger context of my life” (115). Autoethnography is a powerful method because it illuminates that which is not immediately visible or consequential. When I use autoethnography I use it to illuminate.

By the age of twenty-three I had come to be keenly aware of my body, trusting my inner most instincts. I could usually predict when I was going to get sick, probably in large part because it happened calamitously yet routinely every year. Presently I’m washing my hands insistently over the course of the days as a self-prescribed treatment recommended by my achy muscles. Over and over again throughout the day I fill my palms up with an aggressively liberal amount of soap and fidget them under violently hot running water. The

pain from purging myself of the risk of diseased bacteria is so intense that it triggers a memory.

I'm attending a grade school in southern rural Illinois named Red Bud Elementary. Red Bud is what is known as a 'sundown town' meaning that historically persons of color were not welcome in city limits after the sun went down under threat of lynching and Jim Crow. According to US Census data in 2000 Red Bud had 3,422 White citizens, not one person of color registered. My memory takes place some two or three years before that 2000 census. In 1998 I was about seven years old and in the second grade of an all White school. I have two memories that pertain significantly to this time in my life. The first is a particularly long school recess in which I lost three friends because I screamed profanities at God. To wit the exact phrase was "Fuck you, God!" said loudly to prove to them my disbelief. It's sensible that I would later grow up to be an atheist.

The more pressing memory comes about at the same age and takes place at Red Bud Elementary. On this particular day the school, which was not very big, elected to participate in a school wide sanitation education program known as Glo Germ™. Glo Germ™ is an educational product designed to simulate the spread of infectious germs. The system involves two components, a UV light, and a sticky fluorescent hand cream. My classmates and I returned from recess excited to participate in what had been described to us as a kind of game. As we entered the room, single file, we stuck out our hands and a facilitator dumped a load of white goop onto them. None of us at the time were quite aware of the characteristics of semen, which benefited the effectiveness of the program. We were instructed to rub the cream thoroughly into our hands and arms. Ironically, the faux germs smelled like bleach.

After the cream is all rubbed in and the young classroom murmurs die down we are given a brief lesson about germs, bacteria, and viruses. Nationally these types of programs became popular shortly after the 1990 adoption of the American's with Disabilities Act. The United States was finally talking about disease and it was only about a century late. Sexual education was either non-existent or abstinence-only in most parts of the country. The earliest messages I can remember learning about my body were fear and anxiety. The government's early disease programs focused on prevention rather than a cure, and in turn the state ushered in an era of stigma and shame surrounding bodies, disease, and dis/ability. In the brief lesson germs and diseases were conflated, pathologized, and securitized. The lesson ended by covering the FDA recommended hand washing technique. During the lesson we were touching our pencils, notebooks, desks and everything in arm's reach. Next we were instructed to go into the co-ed restroom and wash our hands mimicking the technique we just learned. We remained single file until we got into the restroom, which was never intended to house all students at once. Hand washing chaos commenced. The second grade class of Red Bud Elementary did not leave a dry spot in that bathroom on this particular day. Soap, suds, and scalding water everywhere, my classmates and I returned single file to the room, which was now dark. With the lights turned off the facilitators turned to their final parlor trick of UV lights. Desk by desk they swept like forensic scientists revealing the concentrations of germs that even the most tedious washers had missed. Invisible death threats pointed out to each and every one of us, between our fingers, in between our nails and nail beds.

I'm jolted back from my memory to the sink where my hands are red and raw from prolonged exposure to hot water. I lift my hands closer to my face almost as if to expect to

see the remaining germs in all the porous nooks and crannies. Our bodies are sites of knowledge and are capable of communicating in more ways than social scientists have traditionally believed.

Autoethnography is an embodied and illuminating process of sense-making similar to Glo Germ™. Narrative resistance showcases what remains unexamined in our lives. I come to autoethnography because often the subjugation, discrimination, and oppression of bodies with disabilities is taken as normal or even progress. Our progressive hands have neglected germ-ridden spots just like the hands of the Red Bud Elementary second grade class.

UNDER THE MANTLE: A DESCRIPTION

It is hard for me to put an exact start time or end time to the performance art project that is *Under the Mantle*. The autoethnographic and allegorical methods of the show truly span across time and space. There are histories in the show, often times deeply personal histories. *Under the Mantle* did not really begin when my partner Meggie and I set pen to paper; much of the script was already experienced and lived in our bodies. But still, we thought it best to go ahead and write a script which we completed while bringing in the New Year in 2015. We performed *Under The Mantle (UTM for short)* in the Marion Kleinau theatre for three nights February 26th–28th. Our show poster left much to the imagination of the Southern Illinois University audience members we aimed to attract; in dark colors the only visible objects were a menacing volcano and a smoldering fireplace. The text on the poster informs the audience that *UTM* is an “experiment in pessimism”, and also that there will be a different ending to the show each night. In what follows I will offer a textual description of the performance from a journalistic perspective. Third person detachment, while completely impossible, makes for a better show description in this case because my roles as author and performer infer analysis that would not otherwise be accessed by a random audience member or reviewer.

Under the Mantle was composed of a prologue, four scenes, and an epilogue. Each scene contained two parts; part A is a fictional allegory, and part B is autoethnographic narrative. In addition each one of the four scenes was written toward a specific pessimistic theme. Their titles are in order of sequence: Existence is Absurd, History is Ironic, Time is a Burden, and Affirmation or Resignation. The scene titles come from themes of philosophical pessimism that are traced by Joshua Foa Dienstag in *Pessimism: Philosophy,*

Ethic, Spirit (2006). Deeper analysis of the four themes of pessimism can be found in the theory section of this document.

The prologue opens with a recreation of an experiment by Alain Bombard commented on by Felix Guattari in *The Three Ecologies* (1989). The lights are dim on the stage and neither performer is yet present. The stage curtain is closed and the only visible objects are two large aquariums that are slightly ahead of the stage both on the right and left. Upon entering the theatre the audience gets a glimpse inside the tanks, one clean and one dirty, each containing an octopus. The performers enter from the sides of the stage and take position behind one of the octopus tanks. With no introduction or discussion of their identities the performers begin toying around with the tanks as they discuss what appears to be the result of Bombard's experiment.

Meggie

How many more times do we have to do this experiment before they get it?!

Mike

"The experiment involved two glass bowls, one filled with polluted water . . . in which a clearly very healthy octopus [is] swimming around - virtually dancing"

Meggie

The second bowl, though, was filled with pure, unpolluted water. Within seconds of the switch, the octopus curled up, dead.

Mike

Never to dance again.

Meggie

I wonder, was that a failure or a success?

Mike

It certainly is a matter of perspective. But no matter what, the octopus dies, every time. Every time. Inevitability as if Fated.

As the octopus is removed from its murky natural habitat and placed in a purified water environment it immediately curls up and dies. Before the cephalopod carcass has touched

the floor of the tank the performers are asking questions about the nature of progress and the interconnectedness of nature and culture. The prologue makes the audience skeptical of their expectations, before even witnessing the octopus tanks most audience members might intuitively believe that clear water is superior to dark, while that assumption is almost never true for the octopus. Progress is a matter of perspective.

Just as soon as the lesson from the prologue begins to set in the performers are beginning to transition into scene one. The following bit of script ends the prologue and introduces the props, setting, and characters of the performance.

Mike

[Curtains begin slowly opening. Lighting set: soft whites on Cuernavaca, reds on Mantle, and blues/purples on Volcano]

Thus our story begins with the audience sitting idly by like the town of Cuernavaca, with two of our main characters, Mia and Zarathustra, pitted between two smoldering, volcanic, examples of Affirmation and Resignation

Meggie

Oh, and who are we? Well, that comes later.

[Lights slowly fade to red mantle light only]

Cuernavaca is the name of the town in which the allegorical story takes place. It is the name of an actual city in Mexico that rests between many volcanoes. The curtains open to reveal Cuernavaca and the whole set is lit. There are only three installments on the stage but they are each so intricate and loud with color that each is distinct. Farthest stage left is a large vibrant red ribbon volcano, inside the canopy is a raised platform supported by boulders and rocks. The impression is that there is a cave on the inside of a volcano, and the cave looks lived in, there are piles of rocks, clocks, and tools around. Zarathustra resides in the

cave, inside the volcano and under the Earth's mantle. Stage center is a rotating fireplace with three distinct mantle faces. The first mantle face is soot covered brick that looks worn down and crumbling. The second mantle face is a classic ivory white hearth, atop the mantle are a picture of the performers, a first place debate trophy, a dead red flower, and some books. The third and final mantle face is unfinished wood, it looks more like an incomplete project than it looks like a fireplace. Finally stage right is the actual town of Cuernavaca, where Mia resides. The first prop is an elegant red chair and desk. Behind the desk are huge red streamers that stretch down to the floor, there are numbers one through twelve pinned up to the streamers to give it the appearance of a very disambiguated clock face. With the exception of a small black box placed stage front right the entire set is constructed from those three installments: volcano, mantle, town.

Scene one part A is "Existence is absurd. Accordingly the characters in this scene, Mia and Zarathustra, seemed disappointed as soon as the story begins. Zarathustra explains how he came to live inside a volcano after being displaced from the actively eugenic town of Cuernavaca. He tells a fictional story but it is one that is known in the heart of the United States of America; ugly laws, public nuisance laws, housing discriminations, zoning violations, gentrification, redistricting, and displacement. Mia offers up her defense of the town she governs citing tradition and history. The only thing her citizens have ever known is a sense of temporality based on the activity of the surrounding volcanoes. The citizens sense of time is not informed from their birth or from the prospect of their death, each of those moments are insignificant to the time created by the volcano. Mia tells the audience that when the volcano erupts her protocol is to rescue 70 of its exemplary citizens to restart the civilization. As the plot begins to develop absurdity is definitely one of the

first impressions the audience comes to terms with, though perhaps more absurd to the performers is that this fictional story was so easily fathomable.

Part A of scene one ends with Mia and Zarathustra debating where to begin the recounting of their story. Zarathustra suggests that volcanoes begin at the end of their life and so too should the story. There is a short transition, the performers do a costume change and scene one part B begins. Walking toward stage front now are the more familiar faces of graduate students and romantic partners Meggie and Mike. This scene marks the introduction of the performances autoethnographic characters. For the purposes of this section 'autoethnographic' refers to a qualitative method of inquiry situating personal lived experience in conjunction with culturally systemic criticism. Autoethnography is further reviewed and explained in the methods section of this document.

Part B of scene one is an introduction to the characters Meggie and Mike. The performers in this scene represent themselves by giving the audience some context about their lives. As Meggie and Mike walk to stage front and break out of their former allegorical characters they each pick up one up of a rope and create tension by tugging in opposite directions. They shout identity markers at each other and battle for control of the rope creating a tug-of-war effect.

Mike

Cisgender, White, US American, Woman!

Meggie

Ha! Cisgender, White, US American, MAN!

Mike

You have class privilege!

Meggie

Oh please. We're both employed by the university, earning below the poverty line.

Mike

Yeah but you are getting your Ph.D and I am only getting my masters!

Meggie

Wow, Is that ageism?

Mike

Well, you're straight!

Meggie

So are you!

Meggie and Mike Together:

NOT!!!

The performers go on for many more different cultural observations of each other. Mike and Meggie have a sense of play about them in these staged arguments adding a layer of intentional skepticism to the dialogue, they performers are inviting the audience to realize their exchange is not a productive way to speak about identity. The tug-of-war ends sharply and the performers use the rest of the scene to contextualize the things that had just been revealed about them to the audience. Mike talks about his anxiety disorder, depression, grief and how those factors impacted his social development through collegiate debate and his father's Multiple Sclerosis. Meggie talks about the depressingly constant forms of sexism that pervade women's lives and how the mundanity of it all causes boredom. Her stories begin to overlap Mikes as she speaks about sexism and boredom in collegiate debate and in the absenteeism of her father. They end the scene by agreeing that optimism just doesn't come easy for those who are gratuitously impacted by disablism and sexism.

Scene two follows the same part A / part B structure and is titled "History is Ironic". Philosophically the irony of history refers to the skepticism of progress because the unyielding reality of temporal existence is constant decay. The scene begins with the

characters Zarathustra and Mia narrating their story from its linear end. They begin the story from the point of Mia's banishment from Cuernavaca. It turns out that as a result of her decision, which is unknown to the audience at this point, the citizens of Cuernavaca exile Mia to join Zarathustra under the mantle of the volcano. The town's banishment of Mia is ironic because it is discovered in this scene that the inside of the volcano is safer than the outside.

Mia

In the end I was exiled from Cuernavaca to suffer under the mantle with Zarathustra. Ironically, through our punishment, through exile, we survived.

Zarathustra

Exile was not a resolution, however. It was through our bodies as antagonisms, as irreconcilable to the Cuernavacan framework that led to exile. Banished under the mantle.

Mia

I know you're wondering what we did down there, under the mantle. Wondering if we were stooped in boredom, how long we were there, yearning for a material measurement to aid in your understanding. Wondering when our exile under the mantle began, how long it lasted, how it ended.

Zarathustra

You can only be bored if you're aware of time; if you have been told you could be doing something better. Protected from destruction, I know no death. Or, perhaps, through destruction I emerge again and again and again. Death is understood quite simply for a humanity based in progress.

The big point of drama in this scene is the proposed change in thinking about the volcano. Zarathustra recommends thinking about the volcano exploding from the outside in rather than from the inside out. Mia is seemingly gives way to this epistemological shift and as her world is turning upside down she joins Zarathustra on stage left inside the volcano. The only harmony she finds is in the beautifully dangerous volcano.

The scene transitions and part B begins, replacing the non-linear story arch of Mia and Zarathustra with a more temporally grounded narrative about Meggie and Mike. This

scene continues the theme of history being ironic through performance engagement with gender expectations, narcissism, and agonism. It begins with Meggie telling a joke about being a mentor of Mike's in high school. At the time the performers age difference was much more apparent and the implication of the joke is that she gets all the nasty feminine labels that come along with dating a younger man. She confesses that at the time she knew Mike in high school she regarded him as everything that she hated about the debate space; arrogance, masculinity, and narcissism. The pace of the scene picks up now as Mike begins to reflexively narrate his masculinity through a critical disability studies framework. As Meggie and Mike mirror each other aggressively lifting weights Mike speaks about his dad with all his vanity, and bodybuilding, and his influence on Mike through life and death. After reminding the audience about his multiple sclerosis Mike continues by explaining how historically the disabled body has been ascribed the narcissist pathology because these individuals must continually advocate for their own accommodation. Unflinchingly requesting the rights to participate in civic society was pathologized and demonized for example, Sigmund Freud considered accommodation to be a matter of psychological repression. They drop the metaphorical weights they are lifting and are now practicing weight distribution techniques as Mike drags Meggie on his back across the stage. The performers rely on each other, slowing giving in to the weight of the other and all of the context associated with their life. The scene ends by Meggie discussing an anonymous letter dropped in her mailbox that diagnosed her with Attention Deficient Disorder. It's clear at the end of the scene that American's toss around pathology in a flippant and frequent way.

Scene three begins from the theoretical pessimist position that time is a burden. This scene picks up with that concept by liberating the audience and performers from linear sequencing. Mia and Zarathustra are now in a different moment before the citizens of Cuernavaca have banished them. This moment is their initial introduction sometime before the rumbling of the volcano. They speak together about power, a concept that relies significantly on the prospect of death. There is chemistry between the components and the impression that is left with the audience at the end of their interaction is that Zarathustra might not be entirely of this world. Mia and Zarathustra up to this point have not been staged speaking directly toward one another, they are always looking slightly off in the distance. At this point in their allegory Mia and Zarathustra break the linear structure again and shift into direct dialogue. The two narrate their first time formally meeting in an old decrepit house outside Cuernavaca's city walls. In this moment as the mantle in center stage is rotated to reveal a soot covered stone fireplace the lights are dark and music ominous. Zarathustra seems to exist as the necessary ethereal counterpart to the gratuitous eugenic violence of Cuernavaca, he appears at some points to be a figment of Mia's imagination. This question is never further explained for the audience.

Part B of scene three begins with Meggie and Mike back to stage front. Mike is on stage left and Meggie on stage right with a rope tightly held between them. The theme is still that time is a burden and the performers are describing the beginning of their intimate relationship, which occurred some time after they first met at summer debate camp. Meggie and Mike started their relationship, they tell the audience, a few months after the death of Mike's father. He narrates to the audience the impact his fathers' suicide had on him, and how it was connected to his multiple sclerosis, pharmaceuticals, and mental

health. Meggie narrates the impact that losing her grandfather a year later deeply impacted her. For the performers death is a reminder that humans do not intimately control the conditions of our existence. The inevitability of closure leaves us freer to enjoy each moment together. The performers remark on the beginning of their relationship.

Meggie

Mike and I didn't speak for 4 years after debate camp in 2008. It wasn't until 2012 that our paths crossed again, here at SIU.

Mike

Our 2nd meeting was, ironically, so similar yet distinct from our earlier encounters. Just like before, our meeting was preceded by death.

Meggie

We were drunk and disoriented at a party my roommate and I were hosting.. I had learned prior to his arrival at the party an important detail: his dad had just committed suicide 2 months earlier, his last words to Mike hurtful and accusatory.

For me, the logical solution was to confront the information I had been told head on. So, taking his face in my hands, I make sure to express that "I'm sorry about your dad." However squirmish, I didn't let go, forcing him to hold my gaze.

Mike

Its not immediately a happy story after that like Hollywood demands we expect. Even after we re-met I continued to waste away, the difference is that with her there I managed to live to tell about it. It wouldn't be the first time or the last time that something was born out of the clutches of death.

As the rope between them grows shorter and shorter the performers begin to emulate how communication changes when time feels short. When it feels as if someone's words will be their last, the nature of the communication space changes. As they each take turns pulling into the rope and creating more tension their stories amplify and portray time as a burden rather than a gift.

In the final scene of the show the performers chose to focus on the final tenet of pessimism, which is a choice between affirming life or resigning it. The question is what to do with the knowledge of pessimism, should we, or should we not, desire to escape our

present suffering? Now on the stage Mia's office in Cuernavaca is in disarray. The large disambiguated clock face that once hung above her space now missing numbers is somehow more startling, even though the 'clock' was never completely normal to begin with. It becomes clear what Mia was tasked with all along in the final scene of the allegorical performance.

Mia

After meeting Zarathustra, I spent the evening sleeping at the mantle, willing the flames to breath reason, answers, or clarity into a pit burrowed deeply within me. Wishing I'd never dreamt of Zarathustra.

What were my options? Choose 70 citizens or believe in Zarathustra, in doing nothing, in risking the consequences of not choosing.

Zarathustra

The differences, though, illuminated in the protocol. Asking you to rank the privileged for a future civilization embedded in more of the same.

Mia

Is it better to reason and predict, knowing the prediction is inevitable, or ignore reason, not knowing what inevitability will bring?

Mia is in charge of a civilization steeped in eugenics and danger. At the whim of the volcano near the town Mia is tasked with enforcing a policy that selectively chooses 70 citizens to survive the eruption and repopulate the society. The rules, manipulation of time, and dogmatic traditions it was clear all along that there was something suspicious about Cuernavaca but only now are the audience members made aware of the depth of the plot. Zarathustra circles around the broken Cuernavacan clock while proselytizing existentialist philosophy to the audience. The two interact one final time in front of the in process version of the mantle center stage. In the end of the allegorical narrative the story is truly only just beginning. Mia is not yet aware of the choices she inevitably will make. The perspectivist questions that Zarathustra offers beg the audience to consider if Mia would

have made the same choices if she was aware of the outcome? The scene ends as Cuernavaca is engulfed in flames. They focus on the volcano for this scene and have completely abandoned the Cuernavaca side of the stage. They focus on how volcanoes are traditionally staples of annihilation and yet they stand beautifully as ever in this moment threatening the oppressive society nearby. In the end all they ask for is a transvaluation, to move somewhere beyond the narrow categories of good or evil.

The music fades out, and the lights refocus on the octopus tanks featured in the prologue. Part B of scene four is the epilogue to the performance. The characters Mia and Zarathustra rise and shed their costumes to assume the roles of the scientists who conducted the octopus experiments initially. They remove their character dress as they once again point to the consequences of optimism. They say, as they slowly inch forward from the depths of the volcano, that optimism is training in expectation. Expectations are hopeless delusions according to the scientists, and the thing about what we expect is that it all depends on your perspective. The expectation of clear water is a death sentence for the octopus. The performers return to many of the same lines that opened the show, as a sort of recurrence. The sound of erupting volcanoes begins to fade in and the performers ask the audience how they know they are supposed to survive? The lights fade out, there are a few moments for reflection, and then the show is complete.

ANTAGONISMS: THE ANALYSIS

Crip-pessimism is a thematic lens by which to orient toward performances of disability both everyday and staged. In the next three sections crip-pessimism is used to analyze three important elements of the performance art project *Under the Mantle*. The analysis serves as much to explain the complex metaphors in *UTM* as well as express the synthesis of the theories of Critical Disability Studies and Philosophical pessimism.

The following sections are also intended to demonstrate that the theories of CDT and pessimism aren't just mashed together assuming that their internal properties will remain unchanged. Premises of pessimism alter the foundations of CDT by first and foremost challenging the expectations of the paradigm. Critical disability theory, by virtue of being born first in law and then in higher education, has a stake in many neoliberal projects. Pessimism challenges the utopist goals that can often find their way into social justice commitments. Pessimism asks if critical disability theory is working toward equality or justice, and if we even understand the difference. Additionally the important distinction between models of identity based in sameness or difference is brought about by pessimism. Critical disability studies needs to work within a framework of difference, because disability is the culture that isn't. Disability cultural identity is characteristically limitless (Brown, 2002). Finally, pessimism alters CDS to more precisely answer questions about agency and redistribution. Nothing is better suited to combat the sensationalism of disabled bodies than a big dose of philosophical pessimism.

Conversely I do not want to over emphasize the role of pessimism in all of this. Because pessimism is a philosophy that popularly developed in the 19th century it has been around a lot longer than disability studies, and subsequently must adjust to the

contemporary CDT. Pessimism as a philosophical strain makes a lot of claims about the universalist 'human' condition. Claims based on the fundamental human condition often time generalize and essentialize humanity as if it were not constructed from billions of individuals. CDS challenges this 'human' ontology and demands context at every turn. Additionally philosophical pessimism has tended to be overly individualistic because it understands that relation with any thing, including bodies, is fleeting and rushing into the dread of a linear past. CDS necessitates an engagement with the systemic and the collective. Pessimists cannot be so isolated that they forget to be intersectional and multi-dimensional. Finally, and perhaps most importantly for the dis/abled body, CDT makes a push to remove pessimism from the affective domain and restore it to (meta)theoretical status. The turn in thinking about pessimism as an intellectual worldview to an emotional disposition has been gratuitously violent for marginalized identities, particularly by what Freud (Qtd in Siebers, 2008) calls the narcissism of small differences, a term describing his idea that minor distinctions between people summon the greatest amount of narcissistic rage" (p. 44). The theme of crip-pessimism combines the theories of CDT and pessimism to strip dominant, eugenic, disablist society of an argument that is used to keep many in their place of marginalization, that dis/ability is individual and hopeless.

The argument that this essay sets out to make is that the combination of the theories of critical disability studies and philosophical pessimism is generative. By crip-pessimism I mean specifically identity politics based arguments from a disabled subjectivity that are concomitantly understood as angry, radically negative, regressive, and/or/also pessimistic. In the 30 years marking the lifespan of disability studies the topic of identity politics has been hotly contested. Scholars such as Simi Linton (1998) and Tobin Siebers (2008) argue

in support of disability identity politics, claiming, “disability identities, because of their lack of fit, serve as critical frameworks for identifying and questioning the complicated ideologies on which social injustice and oppression depend (p. 105). Alternatively authors such as Lennard Davis (2010) argue that because the disability model of social constructionism is “tremendously underdeveloped theoretically and methodologically” (p. 306) disability studies should progress past its interest in identity politics. The choice to include identity politics into the thematic purview of crip-pessimism fulfills a commitment to structural antagonism. In other words, crip-pessimism strategically affirms the cultural binary between the abled and disabled for the purpose of raising the stakes of dis/ability studies.

The Volcano

We are, all of us, growing volcanoes that approach the hour of their eruption, but how near or distant that is, nobody knows- not even God. – Freidriech Nietzsche

Volcanoes are profoundly interesting to me if for no other reason than the utter absence of knowledge surrounding them. While researching and devising a script for the performance art project *Under the Mantle*, my partner and I turned to some contemporary research about volcanoes. As soon as we begin researching we found a small headline that sparked our interest claiming that modern-day volcano models were wildly incorrect. The research housed in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of the Sciences* (2014) was named ‘mantle updrafts and mechanisms of oceanic volcanism’. The research disproved what scientists had believed about the causes of volcanic eruptions (Iacurci, 2014). They found that what is driving the motion is not heat from the core, but cooling at Earth's

surface. This cooling and drives mantle convection, the cooling of the core, and Earth's magnetic field - volcanoes are simply a side effect.

Under the Mantle capitalized on this scientific revelation about volcanoes and took it to the realm of metaphor. The message that the metaphor of the volcano delivers is that as researchers we need to consider external causalities as much as internal properties. In terms of disability the argument being made by the volcano in *UTM* is desperately necessary. The volcano represents the hotly contested idea of the social model of disability. All too often the dominant medical discourse surrounding disability is biologically deterministic and individualized. The medical industrial complex thrives on reducing dis/ability to an internal property rather than cultural construction because pharmaceutical companies earn more profit for curing symptoms than for curing prejudice. The message of the volcano in *UTM* is clear on this point; dis/ability is socially constructed and exists, in part, because of the failure of our social environment to be accessible.

The volcano represents a shifting of the onus, in which, the compulsory able-bodied society that we inhabit is held culpable for dis/ablism. It is of course, a matter of perspective. If a wheelchair user is incapable of entering a building because of stairs guarding the entrance is that the responsibility of the wheelchair user or the building? And, why shouldn't it be the fault of the building? The Supreme Court recently found in *Citizen's United v. Federal Election Commission* that corporations themselves constitute human beings. Yet, all too often the cultural expectation in these circumstances is that the wheelchair user should have planned better, or gotten assistance, instead of holding the architecture accountable.

The intention of crip-pessimism is to raise the stakes of disability studies research. If the stake of our research is currently to blame the dis/abled body for their disablement then we must raise the stakes as the volcano does. To resituate dis/ability criticisms from the individual to cultural domain makes possible a vast study of dis/ablism by which a litany of 'normal' practices can be examined for eugenicist principles. The dis/abled are in a unique space to be able to make this type of meta-theoretical shift because we occupy a fungible and accumulated position in the ordering of society.

Disabled comedian and journalist Stella Young (2014) says it best in her TED talk on disability and inspiration porn, Young argues, "For lots of us, disabled people are not our teachers or our doctors or our manicurists. We're not real people. We are there to inspire". In that moment Young exemplifies crip-pessimism. She takes careful note of the socially dead, fungible position that disabled bodies occupy in hegemonic society. By affirming the non-exceptional, anti-sensational, nature of disability Young and her theory of inspiration porn best demonstrate crip-pessimism in practice. Inspiration porn refers to images of visibly disabled bodies performing tasks that are framed to sensationalize the experience, particularly if the task is perceived as something routine or normal for the able-bodied. Young (2014) continues, "the purpose of these images is to inspire you, to motivate you, so that we can look at them and think, 'Well, however bad my life is, it could be worse. I could be that person.'" Inspiration porn is about expectation. Able-bodied audiences do not expect to witness visibly disabled bodies performing the tasks that are constructed and repeated with able-bodiedness in mind. Despite this sort of criticism being increasingly lodged, the cinematic industry shows no signs of pause or concern. Criticisms like inspiration porn have not infiltrated the lavishly ignorant lifestyle of the academy awards.

Crip-pessimism as a theme affirms the paradox that disability is both a unique identity and simultaneously not an identity that should be exceptionalized because of its uniqueness. Disabled identity is both fungible and accumulated. Rationality and the assertion that human reason will lead us to one optimal answer to our questions is the logic of optimism that has a way of purifying its dissenters. Ambiguity, uncertainty, and paradox are essential tenets of crip-pessimism. The volcano perfectly embodies the uncertainty and paradox of dis/abled identity because it demonstrates that to be dis/abled is always already both biological fact and cultural expectation.

Inspiration porn as tactic of power redistribution offered by Young (2014) and many others exemplifies both the possibility and *need* for a thematic frame of crip-pessimism. Critiques like inspiration porn substantiate disabled time as flat circular time. Inspiration porn, much like the volcano, fits within a theme that questions the larger narrative of progress imposed by neoliberalism at the expense of the disabled. At its core the inspiration porn critique asks what disabled bodies are actually achieving and why witnessing our struggle motivates able-bodied audiences? Additionally critiques such as inspiration porn are essential to relocate the onus of social justice back to the systemic, back to society instead of the individual. Inspiration porn memes and artifacts function discursively to create the disabling trope of the 'supercrip'. The supercrip is a metaphor which, embodies the popular image of disability as 'something' that one must successfully overcome, rather than learn to adjust to. It does not challenge the cultural and environmental burdens, but demonstrates that they can with sufficient will power be overcome" (Kama, 2004, p. 449). By putting the responsibility of change on the disabled individual systems of oppression escape the conversation unscathed. The critiques coming

out against inspiration porn and the supercrip are part of the thematic umbrella of crip-pessimism.

Finally, criticisms like inspiration porn point to the absurdity of dominant societies expectations of the disabled. A fundamental part of crip-pessimism is to recognize that the means to achieve agency are promoted and expected by a eugenic society and yet they are often unavailable in those societies. Frankly, the means to achieve happiness are not disability accessible. Neoliberalism's emphasis on efficiency and productivity are part and parcel to our society of compulsory able-bodiedness (McRuer, 2010). Compulsory able-bodiedness is the tendency to assume and prescribe an able body through discourse. By reconfiguring the onus, inspiration porn points to our cultural expectation of able-bodiedness and underscores the necessity of its obliteration.

The Temporality

From the outset *UTM* makes an explicit claim in tempering with normative structures of time. From the disambiguated clock face on the stage above Cuernavaca to the performers non-linear story telling, *UTM* stresses the importance of temporality at every turn. Consideration for temporality and context has not always been so foundationally integrated into disability studies. As the literature review section of this essay has demonstrated there is very little paradigmatic variance with regard to disability literature in communication studies. In fact, one of the most central theories for understanding the interconnectedness of identities, intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1998) scholarship seldom addresses time and the associated politics. It is on this point that *UTM*, and crip-pessimism by extension, makes a vital contribution to permute disability and communication studies.

When I started this project I thought it an abhorrent terror that disability was rarely, if ever, mentioned in intercultural communication texts. It was infuriating to me that my disability, which is of course culturally contextual, was not ever referred to as cultural. It wasn't until I got feedback on a proposal of this project that I was asked if it "is beneficial to the cause to define disability as a culture?" At first this question made my blood boil even more! When I sat with my feedback a little longer I, as a part of my anxiety, considered all the different answers that I could come up with for why disability should be considered a culture. In my optimistic search for a rational, consistent answer the one option I failed to consider was that it is not beneficial. It all became clearer when I heard Stella Young (2014) and the TED talk lecture that I mentioned above. When she said, "We are not real people. We are there to inspire." it suddenly clicked for me. Disability is the culture that *isn't*, a cultural identity, which is simultaneously ignored and identified by its cultural absence.

Identities such as dis/ability exist outside of the domain of cultural competence. Postmodern theories of identity, which are based in relationality, have often imbued within them a mythic equality. Identity as relational or as inter-subjective grossly inflates the agency with which some identities can come to be hailed. As Pensoneau-Conway and Toyosaki (2011) remind of inter-subjectivity, "we are constituted through our embodiment, which is a response to others with whom we are intersubjective coemergents. We come to know one another through those embodied relationships" (384). Disabled identity complicates our models of intersubjectivity, which assume tit-for-tat hailing and interpellation. More often the identity relation that occurs across difference transpires with hyperbolic exaggerations of the disabled identity being related. How does an actively eugenic, ableist, and disablist society relate to the unintelligible cultural identity of

disability? It uses its expectations; and in the failure of those expectations, which are often sensationalized ideals, we learn to theorize identity differently.

Many disabled bodies, their families, and allies with myself included “crave recognition from the human register. It feels like [we] occupy this strange and precarious no-man’s land in-between disability and humanity” (Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2014, p.2). The language of disability and the disabled culture that *isn’t* emphasizes the need for multi-dimensional points of convergence via difference. Multidimensionality (Hosking, 2008) is to critical disability theory as intersectionality is to critical race theory. Whereas often times in academic neoliberal discourse intersectionality is regarded as an additive accumulation of identities. Multidimensionality asks a similar question of cascading and overlapping oppressions. When I invoke multidimensionality though, I think of it as expanding past intersectionality, which is limited in its linear backdrop. *UTM* makes explicit use of multidimensionality by articulating the active manipulation of time, flashforwards, flashbacks, and tense shifts open space for the audience to experience time dissonance. Multidimensionality also better serves communication studies models than its predecessor intersectionality. Multidimensionality emerges from critical disability studies and it is as such that it has always maintained a skeptical grasp on structuralist theories of language. Disabled communication is rarely as transparent and easily understood as structural models of communication. In the crip-pessimism advanced by *UTM* language itself is deeply partial, incomplete, and biased.

Multidimensionality considers differing relationships to time, history, and accumulation. Able-bodies cannot be said to entirely inhabit the identification of able-bodied because it is so fragile and temporary. One proverbial slip on the ice and a disabled

identity can be created, but only if the society at the time ascribes the injuries to be a disabling. Crip-pessimism affirms the constant multidimensional alterity within which our identities are negotiated with presence, absence, and everything in-between.

Crip-pessimism changes the stakes of identity theorizing by suggesting that some ideologies are just not compatible. Instead, we in the communication discipline might need to become okay with irreconcilable antagonisms such as the relationship between humanity and disabled bodies. By clinging to the norm of the paradigm and positioning identity as a reconcilable conflict, communication studies has inadvertently participated in the spoon-feeding of mythic optimistic equality. Afro-pessimist Frank Wilderson (2010) argues succinctly,

The radical fringe of political discourse amounts to little more than a passionate dream of civic reform and social stability...The effect of this upon the academy is that intellectual protocols tend to privilege two of the three domains of subjectivity, namely *preconscious interests* (as evidenced in the work of social science around “political unity,” “social attitudes,” “civic participation,” and “diversity,”) and *unconscious identification* (as evidenced in the humanities’ postmodern regimes of “diversity,” “hybridity,” and “relative [rather than “master”] narratives”). (p.12)

Accordingly, crip-pessimism feels as if there is no hope for combating eugenics when our radicals are only demanding reformism and the stability of the already eugenic socius. The crip-pessimist perspective on identity does not stop at the level of theory, the critique extends upwards and outwards to the communication paradigms.

The Mantle(s)

The fireplace mantel is the final antagonism that I wish to explore further to express components of crip-pessimism. The mantel was the most labor-intensive part of the performance project *UTM* and basically consisted of building three fireplaces from scratch. I enjoyed the labor. I had already been rehearsing the script when we started set construction and my Dad was fresh in my mind because of his presence in the show. It's synchronous that I would use the home repair skills my Dad taught me in conjunction with many of his previously owned tools to build a fireplace that would burn in his memory.

The mantle is represented in three ways in the show *Under the Mantle*. The first and no doubt most intuitive way the concept is represented is through the geological term mantle, which refers to layers of the Earth's crust. Additionally *UTM* featured a large fireplace with three mantel places. Although mantel and mantle are distinct words we relied on their similar phonetic association to create a layer to our metaphor. Finally, a mantle is a massive passing on of responsibility, which is the central conflict plot that we devised the script around.

The fireplace was actually three fireplace faces set up in an equilateral triangle shape. As the performance happened the performers would periodically rotate the mantel to reveal a different face. As elucidated in the description of *UTM* above each mantel face was constructed around a specific set of characteristics and intentions. I would like to write here more specifically about what the interaction with the set piece as a whole communicates about crip-pessimism.

The mantel (mantle) metaphor that is utilized in *UTM* begins and ends with resisting binaries. From the early stages of drafting, to its construction, to its effect on stage, the intention of this piece was to represent post-structuralism. More specifically, the intention

was to represent post-structural disability studies. In every turn of the mantel the scene of *UTM* changed and with it the audiences structured hold on plot, character, and space was altered. The intention crafted into the mantel was that our identities do not exist in stable communicative binaries like abled and disabled, it is all much more fluid and complex.

My time with the critical paradigm introduced me to poststructuralism early on and I have been exploring the concept greatly since. Structuralism posits that human culture can be understood in terms of a structure based in language. Although poststructuralism, by contrast, might vary greatly depending upon author two critical themes are the rejection of the sufficiency of structuralism and deconstruction of structuralism's binary logics. An apparent structural binary in the wake of disability studies might be the brightline between ability and disability. Dan Goodley attempts to fold poststructuralism and disability studies together in chapter seven of his book *Disability Studies: An interdisciplinary introduction*. Goodley indicates that the task in poststructural disability studies is "to explore how discourses get into the bodies/mind of (non)disabled people in ways that might contribute to their disablism" (103). This section of the essay is dedicated to paradigmatically situating some of the assumptions poststructural disability studies makes as it informs the theory of crip-pessimism.

Poststructural disability studies mimic the ontological and epistemological assumptions of the qualitative and more aptly the critical paradigm. Investigations of power are at the forefront of the study. In this particular case poststructural disability studies is concerned with the notion of discourse, and the power that discourses have on the material world. Poststructuralism asserts that the formation of identity has occurred through binaristic logic, such as the sign 'disabled' gathering meaning through its pure

contrast with the sign 'abled'. So, one of the first assumptions we can tease out of poststructural disability studies is the resistance to define our identities in contrast to the *other*. Poststructuralism demonstrates "modernity's privileging of *one* (abled, sighted, independent) over the *other* (disabled, blind, dependent), in which the one is upheld as the transcendental signifier" (Goodley, 104). The way that we come to know, the epistemological process, inherent to poststructural disability studies is that discourses of the ideal sign shape our knowledge and inform our identities as *less than*.

The relative strengths and weaknesses of poststructural disability studies vary. The strength to me is apparent in terms of capacity to break with hegemonic binaries and instead encourage complex, fluid, and theoretical identity negotiation. The weaknesses of poststructural disability studies are also apparent, as the work is so highly theoretical that it often lacks exportability to pragmatic situations. Although integrating post-structuralism into performance art greatly amended my opinion that the theory lacked pragmatic application. Of course, I suppose that depends on your opinion of performance art.

The amendment that crip-pessimism makes to post-structural disability studies is antithetical only on the surface. Post-structural disability studies might to easily lend credence to the abandonment of identity politics. The thought mode is nearly limitless as it refuses at every turn to latch on to a structure. Crip-pessimism theorizes difference alternatively by both utilizing identity politics and by strategically utilizing binary logics. After all, it is the structure that is necessary if dis/ability is to enter the register of cultural. Crip-pessimism offers that it is strategic to tow the line between accumulated identity and fungible identity. This is represented in *UTM* by the distortion of the more familiar trope of the mantel place. It is not only beneficial but necessary to be cognizant of the structure

bound cultural construction of dis/ability. The absence of the dis/abled is already so pronounced post-structural alterity might completely remove dis/ability from the rubric of human consciousness. Crip-pessimism places more of a stake, shown in *UTM*, on strategically dis-identifying (Munoz, 1999) with the category of dis/ability.

Identity markers have been categorized in terms of binaries for so long it is sometimes necessary to refer back to a binary to demonstrate your positionality. For some the historical reference is necessary in order to develop language of a disabled subjectivity that can be symbolic of its own existence, rather than on the non-existence of disability. Ultimately for this particular method power ebbs and flows from cultural subscription to discourses. Performance analysis, while tricky, can reveal new ways of thinking about identity and communication that do not rely on overly essentialist tropes of the disabled.

CONCLUSION

Despite the fact that a large basis of American culture is founded on ability, dis/ability rarely enters the dominant public communication sphere. The unpleasant and visceral questions that accompany communication about dis/ability have been strategically re-zoned and relocated like so many dis/abled patients, veterans, and transients. Yet, when conversation about dis/ability does seem to permeate the ideological walls of ability the messages are inspirationally distorted and optimistic. My time researching dis/ability in academia found that the conversation there mimicked the exploitive inspirational human-interest trope found in cinema and journalism. To break the optimistic silence I set out with a performance art piece titled *Under The Mantle* to advance a theme of crip-pessimism, which intended to raise the stakes of contemporary dis/ability research.

The beginning of this essay takes the time to detail the vast theoretical backgrounds of critical disability theory and philosophical pessimism. In the following section I reviewed intercultural communication literature for dis/ability because much of the theory literature I drew from existed outside the communication studies discipline. The evidenced lack of intercultural dis/ability artifacts up against a dis/ability centric performance art project necessitated an interdisciplinary multi-method framework. In that framework I demonstrate how autoethnography is significant to dis/ability studies because it illuminates even the most mundane able-bodied norms. In the final sections I offer a textual description of the performance and hone in on three explicit arguments that augment traditional thinking about dis/ability and communication.

The trouble I encountered with dis/ability research in communication studies has to do with the way American culture understands offensive communication. Political

correctness as a disciplining communication concept dictates what terms are socially acceptable at a given time. Political correctness underscores how many communication studies programs operate within the rubric of conflict (Wilderson, 2010). The thinking that suggests simply avoiding offensive terms will diminish oppression is within the rubric of conflict because it understands the oppression as materially reconcilable. What crip-pessimism does, and what *UTM* performed, is skepticism that speaking inspirationally and avoiding speaking offensively about dis/ability would end disablism. Instead I argued that what dis/ability represents is an antagonism, it is an oppression so much more foundational to the core of American values that linguistic reforms would not even scratch the surface. The significance of antagonism is that it raises the stakes of dis/ability research. The end goal of research should not be to service the meta-theoretical assumptions of the paradigm (Kuhn, 1962), because consequently the researcher never stops to ask if the assumptions of the paradigm are ethical, valid, or effective. Crip-pessimism is a call for some demolition and redistribution of communicative identity paradigms. If the radical promise of our theories is nothing more than a call for social stability then they are complicit in the neoliberal eugenic project. We need to theorize so that there is nothing already 'given' or taken for granted. Often in those moments, like the moments of so many textbooks, the underlying optimism goes completely unquestioned.

Crip-pessimism as a theme is characterized by negotiating debates surrounding the efficacy of identity politics. Arguments that fit within the theme ask why the disabled should abandon their bodies in the political sphere. Social death has already occurred, the dis/abled are being rendered culturally unintelligible and physically fungible. So what we need when we are having discussions about how to progress is a theory that breaks down

the notion of progress. The recognition and need for a theory like this comes about when we ask central dis/ability questions like: 'when did eugenics end?' and 'where is disability in U.S. society before and after the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act?' and 'globally has the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities reconciled the antagonism of disablism?'. These are the questions that I want to end on and encourage communication and dis/ability scholars alike to take up. As scholars and mass media engines continue to project dis/ability within the rubric of conflict our collective reliance on capitalism and neoliberalism grow deeper. It is my hope at the end of this project that my voice both in performing and in writing encourages more scholarship detailing the omnipresence of disablism in American culture. *Under The Mantle* is a reminder to me that all representations of dis/ability have consequences and in many cases all we need to witness those consequences is a slight perspectival shift.

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VITA

Graduate School
Southern Illinois University

Michael L. Selck

Mike.selck@gmail.com

Southern Illinois University Carbondale
Bachelor of Science, Communication Studies, May 2013

Research Paper

Crip Pessimism: Antagonizing Dis/Ability through an Analysis of the Collaborative
Performance *Under the Mantle*

Major Professor: Dr. Nathan Stucky