The Matter of Form: Rewriting Our Way to a Changed Field

Maia Kotrosits

Abstract: This essay argues that the conventional and doctrinal forms in which we do our writing and thinking—because of their indebtedness to racializing, pathologizing, and colonial regimes—put limits on our ability to enact change, resistance, and abolition in our work. It suggests that we find our way to experiments in form, and thus to new possibilities for thought and relation, through mundane interruptions in our abilities to reproduce such forms, as well as through other departures from the over-performed and idealized hyper-rationalism of academic work.

Keywords: academic writing, black studies, colonialism, crip theory, disability studies.

Introduction[1]

"The sonnet, like poverty, teaches you what you can do/without," writes Diane Seuss, in the first line of one of her poems from her Pulitzer Prize winning book, *frank: sonnets*. Seuss writes ambivalently here of what we call, just as ambivalently, the enabling constraint of form: the discipline of restriction that teaches you to *make something* with what is there. Seuss may be ambivalent, but she is not romantic about the enabling constraint of form, since she pairs it with poverty: her own literal poverty is some of the content that fills out the form of this memoir-in-sonnets.

In this book, Seuss coaxes both memoir and sonnet, as forms, past their more recognizable selves toward almost perilous new depths as she writes with unvarnished candor about her son's addiction, about the deaths of loved ones, and the idiosyncratic landscape of rural Michigan with its trailer parks and cattails. Her sonnets all have fourteen lines but aren't written in iambic pentameter. They don't end in rhymed couplets. Sometimes they contain a volta, or little twist in thought, but not at the appointed place of Shakespearean or Italian sonnets. Seuss strips down the sonnet to see what it can do—but "what the sonnet can do" is always weighed down a little bit by the encumbrances of "doing without."

I have often thought about academic forms—articles, monographs, book reviews—as constraints, and I have often thought about those constraints as enabling. Indeed, my own story of becoming an academic is tied to this ambivalent need to *structure* my experience of the world, experience which was at the time both visceral and protean: an unstable substance. I needed more language, quickly. I needed containers, badly. And I got them. But right now, what I mean by academic form is something bigger than genre, although inclusive of it. I mean "form of thought," such as rationalist discourse: reasoned, dispassionate, evidentiary argumentation. I mean the norms of citation which can do iterative storytelling

---

and policing of intellectual history.[2] I mean the prestige economy of knowledge production—the way epistemological weight accrues to prestige presses, publications, and institutions—and all that it foundationalizes.

When I say I want to reflect on the constraints of academic form, when I say I want to ask *what* exactly they enable, I mean I want to ask what they enable *at what cost.* What is, shall we say, their poverty? What's more, I want to play with the terminology of formal constraint as enablement in writing and turn it around, to reverse the terms, and suggest *dis*ablement (expansively defined) as having the potential to bend, loosen, or even shatter formal constraints in academic writing. Formal constraints that are, in actuality, *relational* constraints. In fact, now the term "constraints" even seems too light: inasmuch as forms formalize relationships—relationships to others, to time, to that which we study, to the world—forms are social "architecture."[3] Formal constraints are constraints of thought and possibility.

In what follows, I attempt to glimpse the stakes of this question of academic form through my own extended, ongoing experience of struggle and break with academic form. The struggle with form is reflected in part in the form of the piece itself, which has many of the markers of a traditional academic journal article, while also veering into the personal, the impressionistic, and the experiential. I also contextualize our habitual reproduction of normative and doctrinal forms of thought both within late capitalism, and within racial-colonial-pathologizing regimes. My best hope is that this begins a longer conversation about how we might collectively work to depart from doctrinal and normative academic forms of thought. I want us to ask what kinds of knowing, what kinds of relations, are being rehearsed, and what kinds are being precluded, in our habitual taking up of the usual academic forms. Indeed, what will we do if the usual academic forms of thought actually contravene desires for change, resistance, and abolition? Thus, I also want to provoke us to collectively experiment with testing the limits of doctrinal academic forms, to see where else, how else, knowledge about the past might emerge.

Beyond Content

We implicitly think of justice in academic criticism and history in terms of "content". We fill traditional academic forms with better, more just ideas—more just and more accurate pictures of history, for instance. We interrogate power relations in our stories about the past. We choose our sources thoughtfully. We think more critically about whose work we read, who we cite, and why. We call that work ethical, and of course, it is.

At the same time and related to this understanding of our work as *content*, we are working in the middle of a vast content machinery driven by ubiquitous corporatization.[4] It is the constant demand for scholarly and pedagogical materials, driven by various academic benchmarks and evaluations, that serve student-as-consumers and maintains competitiveness in a historically brutal job market. It is social media culture with its constantly moving feeds, its character limits, and bite-sized, instantly legible takes. This is

---

[2] Rather than say, as Katherine McKittrick offers, knowledge-sharing, or a story of our own unknowing. See McKittrick 2020: 14-34. On how citation and footnoting has reproduced exclusionary stories of feminist intellectual history, see Hemmings 2011: Ch. five.

[3] This formulation specifically belongs to Michal Beth Dinkler and her forthcoming book.

[4] Newfield 2009, Ward 2012.

machinery indulging in the constant lure and "suicidal cycle" of the "new" that is really variations of the same;[5] machinery that enlists intellectual work that is reproducible or extractable—a theory or skill that can be "applied," or information that can be used or be useful.[6] Creativity that is "digestible," recuperable, evaluable. Machinery that enlists our students, their attentions and their labors, into this cycle of content production and assessment.[7] Machinery that polices the limit and demands work that you can take in quickly and assess easily, using ready-at-hand rubrics—whether in the classroom or the review process. The pace of this content machine is fast. Its demands are terse, its patience short. There is very little time in the content machine.

I am not suggesting the content of our work is incidental. Nor am I suggesting that form and content can be divorced from one another. Rather I'm trying to describe a commodifying logic that produces thought as fungible; a commodity that we own or consume, that can be branded and marketed on the internet, to sell ourselves to institutions, etc. In this logic, we become a product, we become a spokesperson for a theory or an idea. Thought becomes substance, currency, social or cultural capital—citable, quotable, usable—rather than thought as possibility, or relation.[8]

We get worn down, understandably, from questioning the form or sponsoring venue of our expressions in the face of the demand to simply produce more content, better content—even, in some cases, more ethical content. But this wearing down is dangerous. It is dangerous because it is exactly in the isolation of content from form or venue, without scrutiny about the kinds of *relationships* produced and reproduced in those forms and venues, that the ethics of any "content" we might produce meet their limit. It mimics the logic of diversity without justice, for instance, in which the identities of the participants in the institutions and structures might become various, but the institutions and structures themselves remain strategically intractable.

The question of academic form is, at least in part, a question of how to get outside of the commodification of thought, toward a fuller embrace of thought as an unfolding and destabilizing process, as stretching toward a different experiencing of the world, and a different set of relations. These questions became most poignant to me under several corroborating and interlinked conditions, in which I was forced to encounter the limits of the forms, both in terms of genre and in terms of cognition, perception, and assessment, that academic work demands. I offer this set of experiences not as some expression of true knowledge, or even a definitive realization, but as an extended and intense moment of difficulty that is epistemologically rich.

These are the circumstances:

---

[5] "The imperial movement of progress is pursued on the one hand as if along a single, straight line of advance, while on the other, it operates in a suicidal cycle where the new can hardly survive the constant and renewable threat of being declared unfit by the newest. The new is an imperial incentive." Azoulay 2019: 32.

[6] This treatment of academic thought as "content" also appears in the way that we value, and tend toward the production of, extractable "information." Approaching scholarship with the question, "What can I use here?" Extraction, the practice of scooping usable bits and the transplantation of concepts with more interest in their currency than their context, is a deeply colonial reading and writing practice, as Eve Tuck and Max Liboiron have argued. See Liboiron 2021: 35.

[7] See Harney and Moten 2013, which differentiates the university as a space of evaluation/accreditation versus as a site of fugitive study.

[8] Again, on good relations in academic writing, see Liboiron 2021: 35.

1) The pandemic and its irrevocable revelation of the violence of the normal, as poet Dionne Brand has named it.[9]

2) My own long period of poor health, some related to long COVID after March 2020, including chronic, almost daily migraines for several years, and the chronic pain of one of my closest friends, also an academic, as we tried (and sometimes failed) to navigate our reading and writing in ways that had integrity for us and met the demands of our careers.

3) The conditions of teaching in a university setting in which students found themselves profoundly exhausted by, struggling against, and captive to the commodification/contentification of education from all angles. They were not only captive to the corporate educational paradigm of acquiring packageable, marketable "skills," but they were captive to it by their very own commodified and consumerist presence in the higher education landscape, as "choosers and buyers." AI plagiarism is a clear symptom of these conditions since AI allows students to enact explicitly their condition of commodified anonymity, with the production of blank and fungible content.

These were entangled conditions of *disability, impairment, and debilitation.* My colleague and I were unable, for several reasons, to produce our usual scholarly content: I with my brain fog and migraines, she with her chronic pain and exhaustion. So too my students were debilitated. Under the ongoing conditions of forced carrying on of business as usual, even while the circumstances of the world and their understandings of it (not to mention the intimate details of their own lives), they were radically revising themselves. My students had generally lost their ability to do the kinds of reading they had always done; in the ways they had always done it. Most of them had trouble concentrating—they could not retain information in quite the same way, were themselves full of anxiety, and couldn't read long texts. This was especially true of the first year or so of the pandemic, but the compulsion to continue despite any extremity is a dynamic that obviously precedes and exceeds that time.

I evoke *debilitation* in this broadened way not to undercut or erase those conditions that we have conventionally housed under "disability." Rather I do so to change the frame away from identity-based analytics that have historically dominated disability studies as an institutionalized discipline.[10] Jasbir Puar, for instance, uses the term debilitation to denote "the slow wearing down of populations instead of the event of becoming disabled."[11] Puar also uses debility in order to name conditions and effects that don't "qualify" under the very racialized recognition politics of disability-as-identity. For Puar, "disability" signals an exceptional condition of a subject, one seeking accommodation and inclusion. Meanwhile, debility signals a set of social, cultural, and political conditions whose "normal consequences" are the unexceptional attrition and injury of psyches and bodies.[12] The carceral state, late capitalist labor exploitation and exhaustion, militarization, and

---

[9] Brand 2020.

[10] "Crip theory" signals this move from disability-as-identity to the critique of systemic and structural normativity, a move made with and through queer theoretical paradigms. See especially McRuer 2006, Clare 1999. So too "mad studies" (addressed further on) takes not only a de-pathologizing approach but produces institutional critique. Both subfields seek not accommodation and inclusion but changed epistemologies and altered social arrangements. See also for example Crosby and Jakobsen 2020.

[11] Puar 2017: xiv.

[12] Puar 2017: xiv. Puar is following the work of Christina Crosby and Julie Livingston.

environmental poisoning are among her most poignant examples.[13] Debility, precisely because it is so quotidian, classed, and racialized, never reaches the echelons of state or social recognition—in part because it is constitutive of biopolitical state regimes.[14]

So too Jonathan Sterne, in his "political phenomenology of impairment," has taken up the term impairment to critique the disabled/non-disabled binary. This binary inadvertently naturalizes institutional diagnoses, as well as the social constructions of a "whole" body that can "become" disabled. Through a detailed and personal account of his experience of voice after vocal cord surgery, Sterne works to de-exceptionalize such bodily changes and holds impairment to be something all of us experience at one point or another, to different extents—it is a "quality of experience."[15] "Impairment works in a shady place between function and non-function," he writes. That is, for Sterne, impairment is not only negative, it is not only about failure or brokenness, it is "rich with texture and potential meaning."[16]

I employ debility, debilitation, and impairment to think more expansively than "disability," to draw our gaze toward the conditions that are endlessly enervating populations, exhausting them, damaging, and impeding them. I hope to draw attention to those limits in mind-body experience that we regularly encounter, to different extents and in different ways, as a condition of living.[17] But in asking about debility, impairment, disability, and *form*, the proposition is not negative. The proposition is not how conditions of disability, debility, and impairment inhibit. Thus, I am not asking how to recuperate debility and re-enter the process of production and contentification because, in actuality, it is the very process of contentification of thought that is inhibitive, and prohibitive. Rather, the formulation here is how impairment and debilitation can interrupt, and how they enable other possibilities for thinking. When we are incapacitated from the consumption and production of content, we have to think, respond, and relate in other ways.

The story of figuring out how to respond, in terms of making and breaking forms, to my students' debilitation is not one story, but many. My own is a bit easier to narrate: Over this strange, extended time of brain fog, anxiety, and chronic migraines, I felt like I lived in a cave. My pre-migraine state was a sense of encroaching doom, a tornado in the distance. The brain fog was a wall. Cognitive clarity was, shall we say, not in the cards. Time stretched and collapsed. Fully captive to it all, but needing to metabolize my experience, and still (as

---

[13] "Further to this project of unmooring disability from its hegemonic referent, critical ethnic studies, indigenous studies, and postcolonial studies have long been elaborating the debilitating effect of racism, colonialism, and exploitative industrial growth, and environmental toxicities. Yet these literatures, because they may not engage the identity rubric of the subject position of the disabled person, are not often read as scholarship on disability." Puar 2017: xx.

[14] "I mobilize the term 'debility" as a needed disruption (but also expose it as a collaborator) of the category of disability and as a triangulation of the ability/disability binary, noting that while some bodies may not be recognized as or identify as disabled, they may well be debilitated, in part by being foreclosed access to legibility and resources as disabled." Puar 2017: xv.

[15] Sterne 2022: 32. One of the challenges of his phenomenology is "how to account for an experience of self that is unstable and ultimately not fully available" (13), which while is emblematic of and concentrated in experiences of pain and extreme exhaustion, is also true of selves at large.

[16] Sterne 2022: 32.

[17] Disability studies and, less so, Crip theory have emerged formally in the overlapping fields of Classics, Biblical Studies, Jewish Studies, and Late Antiquity Studies (all fields with which I'm in conversation). The interests have largely been historicizing, with significant attention to cultural norms, although concerns for method have also emerged. For a few examples across these fields, see Moss and Schipper 2011, Belser 2017, Laes 2017, Solevag 2018, Silverbank and Ward 2020.

always) preoccupied with the past and its literature, I found myself starting to write from this state of mind, one in which the long past and the present were blurred. And so often the language that came to me to express this experience of time was fragmentary and oblique. Its closest form was lines of poetry. I had majored in creative writing in undergrad and was a poetry writer back then (twenty years before), but generally not since.

Over a longer period of 2-3 years, until my migraines became more manageable, I found myself doing writing along two streams: first, some of the more familiar forms of academic writing, and second, a growing collection of these little pieces of writing—poems, micro-essays, and descriptive vignettes that were hard to classify, but felt associatively close to one another. All of the work was invested in roughly the same themes—late ancient Christianity, imperialism, colonialism, hagiography, and so on—but the relationship between the more traditional work I did and the more "experimental" work was tense, mainly because it felt like it was being written by two different people. The formal work was written by someone whose memory and cognition were generally sharp, largely because I could only do that work when I was not in the tunnel of pain. That writer was someone who could schematize, organize. Her segues were clear, her vocabulary professional. The other work was written by someone in a dream-like haze—someone in proximity, always, to pain—who wrote by association and metaphor, and whose associations were sordid but sometimes electric. She was immersed: both more deeply in the present and more deeply in the past. Her writing was economical, condensed out of necessity because she had no energy for long description. She was less coded, more direct. Whatever the writing was, it was not dry.

It felt necessary at some point to give the writer in pain her due, not least because she dominated my experience for a few years. It felt necessary to find a way to understand that the work I was doing was legitimate because it occurred to me how easy it is to write off the work I did in pain, since it was associative, immersive, unpredictable writing. That work is generally classed as not historical, but rather as "interpretive" work, or something like "reception."[18] In other words, a *contrast* to history, even if (as in this instance) done by the same person with the same expertise—even over the same period of time.

The reason such work gets written off is because of the over-identification of professionalized history and critique with rationalism and rationalist discursive modes, which are characterized by a performed analytical distance: apparent even-handedness, categorical distinctions, and taxonomic, genealogical, evaluative thinking. It is also because of the neurotypicality of the academic world, and the world at large, which authorizes and foundationalizes certain cognitive modalities, certain modes of perception, to the exclusion of others. Then we must ask: what is at stake in these dominant cognitive and perceptive modalities?

The Making and Unmaking of the Rational Mind

More critical attention has been given in recent years to the ways modes of perception and cognition are colonial and raced. La Marr Jurelle Bruce's book *How to Go Mad Without Losing Your Mind: Madness and Black Radical Creativity*, explores the whiteness/anti-blackness of

---

[18] The division between "historical" and "interpretive" itself is a heavily policed and politicized divide, one that is racialized and gendered, among other things, with "interpretive" work usually signaling work in which one's subjectivity is not invisible (and of course that disappeared subjectivity is only available to those occupying normative/dominant categories).

rationalism, for instance, writing about what he calls "black madness"—in other words, forms of creativity and expression that are pathologized or foreclosed by the world, understood as "angry," "subrational," or "crazy."[19] So too, Erin Manning has shown how neurotypicality is no less racialized than rationalism. In her book *For a Pragmatics of the Useless*, she takes on the ways whiteness articulates itself in proximity to or as neurotypicality, for instance in its "obsession with individualist independence."[20] Neurotypicality, for Manning, can be understood best through some of its most prized processes and routines, those seen to be "lacking" in those who are neurodivergent. But therein lies the problem, as Manning writes elsewhere, "Neurotypicality is an unspoken but commonly practiced wager that frames knowledge in advance of any question of where else knowing is at work."[21]

Both Manning and Bruce argue for the creativity and perceptive intelligence of those working or cast outside of the norms of rationalism and neurotypicality. But importantly, neurotypicality and rationalism are *operations*. And rationalism, perhaps especially, benefits from a fundamental deception about its own operation: as Donovan Schaefer has shown, "rationalism" has always represented a tense relationship between a performance of distanced neutrality and an obvious recourse to the ways knowing is experienced as felt.[22] But neither rationalism nor neurotypicality, though, are necessary operations we are bound to or even capable of upholding, whether we are classed within normative categories or not.

Because of its resonance with my own experience, for now, I want to focus most on a 2014 article called "Brain Fog: The Race for Cripistemology," in which Mel Chen relates experiences that they describe, with strategic vagueness, as "brain fog." This is a term much more familiar to us post-2020, and because of the ubiquity of impaired cognition after the large-scale debilitation of the pandemic, Chen's piece becomes all the more relevant. In Chen's experience, brain fog includes the haze around migraines, around smoking weed, and around a certain inability to read or think as a kid, which they describe as "feeling stupid." One of the points Chen makes is how completely such states of cognitive density transgress the demands of academic work and their "cognitive tool set: taxonomies, namings, retrievals."[23] "Ultimately," Chen writes, "the academic institutions we inhabit are at this

---

[19] Black madness is, according to Bruce (2021: 6-8): "unruliness of mind," "medicalized madness"/psychopathologies, rage, "psychosocial madness...radical deviation from the normal within a given psychosocial milieu."

[20] Manning 2020: 9.

[21] Manning 2024.

[22] Schaefer 2022: 226-227.

[23] Chen 2014: 184. "Cognitive or intellectual disability—and its broader matrix of cognitive variation—represents the near unthinkable for academia (which then, in the light of the connections I have been making, says something about academia's continuing struggles with whiteness). What are we to do with the brain fog that has become our troublemaking buddy in this context, more prevalent than we were told to believe? What if we cannot cancel it, for those of us who arrive here on more secure cognitive ground? Or those of us who have experienced cognitive change with various shifts due to age, illness, injury, or other bodily transitions? What about the cognitive imposters who have always thought 'I don't think' while somehow getting through? And there could also be the fact that cognitive imposters *are* us, in that we have all trained in an unfamiliar specialty of cognitive style that we have paid, not necessarily life and limb, but certainly money, passion, and labor for. Finally, what about those deemed cognitively deficient their entire lives, about whom definitions, sometimes insidiously, vary; and about those trapped by the strange trades between cognitive disability and race? Where and how do all these differences fit into this picture of academia, of cripistemology?" (177).

moment adept at producing what I would call disciplined cognators. What happens to us in that process?"[24]

While Chen is clear about the racializing equivalencies of cognitive states, one of the larger points they make is that these experiences of brain fog, or cognition-blurring, offer an interesting conceptual standpoint from which to work, not least because *no one* is cognitively "clear" all of the time. In other words, in addition to questioning the kind of cognitive subjects we are being compelled to habitually become, if also failing to be, these cognitive blurs have constructive epistemological possibilities, too.

For me, the epistemological possibilities of brain fog (and sometimes literally fevered un-reason) included being suspended from linear, sequential time: the kind of time that modern historical work implies and demands. Linear, sequential, universalizing time, as many have pointed out, is also *colonial time*.[25] So, with fog and fever, I was actually relieved of that reality construction. Related to this suspension from linear time, I could not disentangle the Christian imperialism I was living and the Christian imperialism I was studying—not because I was tracing lineages or analyzing ideological structures. Not mostly, anyway. Rather, I was experiencing it all in a surreal fashion: late ancient history appeared unpredictably in the quirky, intimate details of my daily life and the social structures before me, playing out with immediacy and in real time—fragmentarily, as if under a shell I picked up at the beach. I found this gripping, even as I found it hard to explain using my usual scholarly apparatus. I did end up shaping it into a kind of whole, a manuscript of sorts, and probably an unusual one by academic standards. But I offer this rendition of my experience not to present myself as a shining example, since my experiments with form before, during, and after that manuscript are piecemeal, ongoing, and unresolved, as one might expect. My experience then is only suggestive.

The reason I situate my experience with this work in cultural studies, though, is so that we might attune ourselves to the ways our cognitive operations and perceptive habits, the very fundamental ways we do our thinking business, are heavy with exclusions. Thus, their interruptions become meaningful. I also want to attune us to the ways apparently "non-ideal" cognitive and/or ostensibly pathological states can be understood as epistemologically rich *because* they are epistemologically difficult. These states-of-mind, or habits-of-perception, offer an escape hatch, if a temporary or fragile one, from the contentification and commodification of thought, with their ability to gum up or slow down, even briefly, the content machines. What's more, their difficulty might very well return us to lively, processual forms of thinking *because* they don't necessarily produce easily harvested information or endlessly replicable methods.[26] In fact, these non-ideal states and otherwise habits of perception need to be valued precisely *for their difficulty*, for their "uselessness" (to borrow from Manning's title).

In other words, to be attuned to these racial, colonial, and pathologizing dynamics of the modalities in which we do our thinking is to feel unsettled by and within the regular forms

---

[24] Chen 2014: 178.

[25] Some key texts for me that address colonialism as and through the organization of time, see Chakrabarty 2000, Rifkin 2017, Mize 2024, and already referenced here Puar 2017 and Azoulay 2019. In the field of late antiquity studies, most recently, see Maldonado Rivera 2022.

[26] "1. Write to life. 2. Write to activate the force of the unthought. 3. Write to field the conditions of other ways of living. 4. Write to encounter the quality of existence that exceeds you. 5. Care for how writing makes a world." Erin Manning 2024.

of academic writing. Given the force of these forms, because of the impoverishing work they do, it is incumbent upon us to examine what, exactly, we can 'do/without'—by bending them, letting them bleed at the edges, and seeing where they break. So, I'm not suggesting we abandon traditional academic forms as much as put pressure on them—taking them less seriously—while also urgently seeking and inventing forms of historical and critical work that hold more of the complexity of life. This complexity includes, not *only*, but inevitably, a mix of cognitive conditions and emotional states, forms of perception, and relationships to debility, disability, and impairment.

Breaking Form: An Inconclusion

"Megetia at the Shrine of St. Stephen"

For Jean Kotrosits

"While she prayed at the place of the holy relic shrine, she beat against it, not only with the longings of her heart, but with her whole body so that the little grille in front of the relic opened at impact; and she, taking the Kingdom of Heaven by storm, pushed her head inside and laid it on the holy relic resting there, drenching them with her tears."[27]

I come to you with the desperation of a woman with a broken
jaw, to a saint's femur, bone to bone, across the graveyard
with red electronic candles and plastic flowers, to the center
where you are, only two blocks from your Levittown house, sky blue
siding, yard with no trees, I can see it from here, to try to touch you or touch
the past which has you in it, by touching the soil that contains you. I come to you
little cage to little cage, tired of living, the beige carpet and defunct
railroad tracks of it, the moldy berry and blown-out sparkler of it, its saltwater taste, less poignant
than tears. I come to ask: How did you do it, sing *Que Sera Sera* and Christmas songs, your last
language, until the day that you died? Please tell me what pulled you back
from the gravel and flat, the coal dust and grease of your childhood. And please—
what did it pull you toward? Clasp my legs between your legs again, as if I'm small,
in your bed surrounded by chairs in case I fell out. Please remind me what is precious, what
can hold me, other than you, as I press my face against this grate, my mouth full of ash.

The poem above arrived from a moment of dream-like historical collapse, entertained through a blurred association of myself with Megetia, a late ancient woman who (according to Evodius) goes with a dislocated jaw to the site of the sacred relic of St. Stephen, longing for relief. This little slip of a story I first encountered in Peter Brown's *The Cult of the Saints*, and Brown uses it to attest to the newfound vibrant power of holy bones in Christian late antiquity. The episode reverberated in, melded with, a moment of visiting my grandmother's grave, when I felt the urge, suddenly and desperately, to touch something about her. In physical pain and weighed down by the profound deadness of the extended socio-political moment I was (am) occupying, touching my grandmother meant locating a vitality and connection I couldn't otherwise, at the time, access. This experience taught me to think about relic veneration outside of rational semiotic categories: the ostensible rational ironies

---

[27] Evodius, The Miracle of Saint Stephen, 2.6. Translation, Peter Brown 1981: 88.

and particularizing Christian ideology of relic veneration (the aliveness of bones or inanimate objects associated with the dead, the elevation of special dead to divine status, etc.) evaporated into a kind of understanding that held something less decisive and more cohesive, more intuitive—and, simply, *more.* All forms constrain, of course, but the sense- and image-driven expansive, and less-resolved nature of poetry (for example) not only makes room for non-rational understanding and processes but also obstructs the information-harvesting impulses of academic readers, in favor of something like a carrying through toward understanding, an ephemeral experience that is not easily substantized.

Form is, again, not only the shape of our habits of thinking but the form our relations take. It makes sense that we would struggle with form; that traditional academic forms feel both hard to live in and hard to leave. Their hold on us is firm, but not intractable—as work like Manning and Moten and Chen shows. There is a live possibility in playing out and playing with the struggle, in breaking form, in frustrating or interrupting traditional forms, and in experimenting with others. I would even say there will be no real foundational changes in our disciplinary epistemologies without a larger address to and proliferation of forms. Not simply a diversity of style, not more variegated content to satisfy various content appetites; but a proliferation of difficult, unfinished experiments in thinking-through and thinking-with. Experiments that move with the frictive force of life as it is lived, including in its manifold departures from the reasoned, categorical, lucid, and executive mind.

Maia Kotrosits
maiakotrosits@gmail.com

Bibliography

Azoulay, A. 2019. *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism.* Verso Books, London.

Belser, J. 2017. *Rabbinic Tales of Destruction: Gender, Sex, and Disability in the Ruins of Jerusalem.* Oxford University Press, New York.

Brand, D. "On Narrative, Reckoning and the Calculus of Living and Dying." Toronto Star, July 4, 2020. [https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/books/dionne-brand-on-narrative-reckoning-and-the-calculus-of-living-and-dying/article_47884274-07ad-561a-973b-027ef2cbc8fb.html;](https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/books/dionne-brand-on-narrative-reckoning-and-the-calculus-of-living-and-dying/article_47884274-07ad-561a-973b-027ef2cbc8fb.html) link accessed Apr. 3, 2025.

Brown, P. 1981. *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity.* University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Bruce, L. 2021. *How to Go Mad without Losing Your Mind: Madness and Black Radical Creativity.* Duke University Press, Durham.

Chakrabarty, D. 2000. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference.* Princeton University Press, Princeton.

Chen, M. 2014. "Brain Fog: The Race for Cripistemology." *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies*, 8(2), 171-184.

Clare, E. 1999. *Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness, and Liberation.* South End Press, Massachusetts.

Crosby C. and Jakobsen, J. 2020. "Disability, Debility, and Caring Queerly." *Social Text,* 38(4), 77-103.

Harney, S. and Moten, F. 2013. *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study.* Minor Compositions, New York.

Hemmings, C. 2011. *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory.* Duke University Press, Durham.

Laes, C. 2017. *Disability in Antiquity.* Routledge, London, New York.

Liboiron, M. 2021. *Pollution is Colonialism.* Duke University Press, Durham.

Maldonado Rivera, D. 2022. "Method, Ethics, and Historiography: A Late Ancient Caribbean in the Temporalities of Empire." *Ancient Jew Review.*

Manning, E. 2020. *For a Pragmatics of the Useless.* Duke University Press, Durham.

Manning, E. 2024. "Write to Life." threeecologies.substack.com; link accessed Apr. 3, 2025.

McKittrick, K. 2020. *Dear Science and Other Stories.* Duke University Press, Durham.

McRuer, M. 2006. *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability.* New York University Press, New York.

Mize, J. R. 2024. "The Deep Time Trap: Retracing Settler Colonialism in Lorine Niedecker's 'Lake Superior.'" *Environmental Humanities,* 16(1), 142-161.

Moss, C. and Schipper, J., eds. 2011. *Disability Studies and Biblical Literature.* Palgrave Macmillan, New York.

Moten. F. 2017. *Black and Blur: Consent Not to Be a Single Being.* Duke University Press, Durham.

Newfield, C. 2009. *Unmaking the Public University: The Forty-Year Assault on the Middle Class.* Harvard University Press, Cambridge.

Puar, J. 2017. *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability.* Duke University Press, Durham.

Rifkin, M. 2017. *Beyond Settler Time: Temporal Sovereignty and Indigenous Self-Determination.* Duke University Press, Durham.

Schaefer, D. 2022. *Wild Experiment: Feeling Science and Secularism after Darwin.* Duke University Press, Durham.

Silverbank H. and Ward, M. 2020. "Why Does Classical Reception Need Disability Studies?" *Classical Receptions Journal,* 12(4), 502-530.

Sterne, J. 2022. *Diminished Faculties: A Political Phenomenology of Impairment.* Duke University Press, Durham.

Solevag, A. R. 2018. *Negotiating the Disabled Body: Representations of Disability in Early Christian Texts.* Society of Biblical Literature, Atlanta.

Ward, S. 2012. *Neoliberalism and the Global Restructuring of Knowledge and Education.* Routledge Press, New York.