

**Liminal Lines:  
Poetic Confrontations With  
Everyday  
Ableism, Racism, and Rape Culture  
From the Ledge**

By

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## Foreword: Synthesis Essay:

The components of this portfolio—"Liminal Lines: Poetic Confrontations With Everyday Ableism, Racism, and Rape Culture From the Ledge"—are as follows 1. "*Kuzushi*", a chapbook of poems named after the Japanese Judo term meaning to put someone off balance. In the case of this portfolio, *kuzushi* is used as a metaphor to decentre the oppressive forces of ableism, racism, and rape culture founded on what bell hooks calls "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy", (personal communication 2016). 2. A talk and performance called "'What's Wrong With Your Leg?': Ableism, Community, and Genesis" given at the Generous Space Toronto \*TBLGQ Christian Community on November 23 2017 where I 'came out of the closet' as a person living with a disability (Osteo-genesis Imperfecta aka brittle bones disease) in response to, and as a deconstruction and decentering of, the ableism and racism in the society and city in which I live: Toronto 3. Two essays a) "Poetry on the Edge" which explores my poetic process as a writer of colour living with a disability in a liminal state b) "Disrupting Disablement: History, Exclusion, Desire and Change" which explores the history of ableism, how it affects me, and what changes I hope comes to be.

"Poetry is not only dream or vision, it is the skeleton architecture of our lives," wrote Audre Lorde in her monumental essay "Poetry Is Not A Luxury", (Lorde, 1984, p. 38). Poetry is the skeleton of this portfolio. Poems written for "*Kuzushi*" came out of poetic inquiry.

In her introduction to "Poetic Inquiry: Vibrant Voices in the Social Sciences" scholar Monica Prendegast argues for poetic inquiry when writing, "The potential power

of poetic inquiry is to do as poetry does, that is to synthesize experience in a direct and affective way,” (Prendergrast, 2009, xxii). Poetic inquiry is an compelling form to talk back to power, and a way of learning and knowing through verse. Such poetry “is practiced on the margins of qualitative research by a small number of poets/scholars, a number of whom are also literary poets,” (Prenderast, 2009). My being on the periphery of society, this form was viewed best for this portfolio.

A poem is life on the page, life within the writer and researcher. The page and writer become one seeing their words, the page, and the poem, forming a triad, working toward a goal: the betterment of society, of the writer, of the person who is a writer and researcher within society.

The two essays “Poetry on the Edge” and “Disrupting Disablement” come out of the themes found in “*Kuzushi*”: conflict, exclusion, erasure, awareness, honouring and remembering. The essays take the form of autoethnography, a form and way of seeking to scrutinize and illuminate personal experience—auto—so as to interpret cultural experience—ethno. Choosing not to do a major research paper, autoethnography is a way to confront canonical approaches and methods of research, making the work political and social justice based.

Autoethnography encompasses many styles. “Poetry on the Edge” and “Disrupting Disablement” see an overlap of two of the many forms available and practiced: personal narrative and Indigenous ethnography. Personal narrative comes in the form of stories based on the writer and researcher’s life. It is a natural extension of poetic inquiry. Indigenous ethnographies “develop from colonized or economically

subordinated people, and are used to address and disrupt power in research, particularly a (outside) researcher's right and authority to study (exotic) others. Once at the service of the (White, masculine, heterosexual, middle/upper-classed, Christian, able-bodied) ethnographer, Indigenous/native ethnographers now work to construct their own personal and cultural stories," (Ellis, 2011).

The oppressive social forces of ableism, racism, and rape culture affect peoples in different and multiple ways leaving many people at the margins of society. Using the theory of intersectionality has informed art and research done for the triad which comprises this project—poems, performance, and essay—created to challenge systems of oppression that see many different peoples live liminally.

The liminal state is one where a person is neither in nor out, not completely excluded or accepted, and always in a state of flux. Essentially, those who experience liminality are at the margins of society. This is where the poems, questions, and revelations in this portfolio come from.

"Liminal Lines" addresses several questions thereby contributing to our world: How does a cis-gendered, mixed-race, Indigenous man of colour who lives with a disability and writes poetry experience this society founded on stolen land? How and why are people with disabilities excluded? Who benefits from this exclusion, and who keeps it going? Can literature be a tool to confront oppression? Are systems of oppression linked? Is intersectionality a valid theory which furthers anti oppression scholarship?

How is desire present in the everyday life of those experiencing and confronting oppression?

Such questions are centred on my life experiences and exploration of everyday ableism, racism, and rape culture. Explorations of such questions were done via journaling, reading, research, and eventually, poems written and re-written; and more journaling, reading, research, and poems written; seeing the circle of experience, exploration, and writing continue.

The poems, performance, and essays are grounded in who I am, and through qualitative research I write of the experience of the coming together of my many identities and how I negotiate such complexities through my lived experience of difference. This complicated navigation of multiple identities in our society and culture are laid out in “*Kuzushi*”, “Poetry from the Edge”, and “Disrupting Disablement”. There is struggle, understanding, and growth.

*Kuzushi* is a Japanese word which means to put someone off balance, take them off their centre. Using intersectionality to decentre what I call—informed by bell hooks—“white supremacist ableist rapist homo-and-transphobic capitalist patriarchy”, and using desire to envision the not yet of our colonial society, the chapbook of poems created for, and the heart of this portfolio, is aptly named “*Kuzushi*”. The poems in “*Kuzushi*” were written respectively for this portfolio. There is a Mexican saying, “Out of poverty poetry, out of suffering, song.” Poetry is song, and song is story. “Dear White Police Officer”, a letter, song, and poem challenging police brutality and the prison industrial complex,

one of the first poems written for “*Kuzushi*”, was performed in the MES class Cultural Production: Performance taught by academic Supervisor Honor Ford-Smith. The poems “We Were Supposed To Be Here” and “I Am Prepared To Live” were performed at, and written specifically for, the one-hour and fifteen minute talk and performance that is one third of this portfolio: “What’s Wrong With Your Leg?”. *Kuzushi* is the centre of my struggle, understanding, and growth.

“Liminal Lines: A Poetic Confrontation of Ableism, Racism, and Rape Culture from the Ledge” is an invitation: come along this anti-colonial exploration of systems of oppression that invade our society. Practice *kuzushi*—moving a structure, in this case oppressive structures, off balance—via reading and later meditating. Join the fight against three of many oppressive systems that hold back humanity: ableism, racism, and rape culture.

\*I began writing/using the acronym TBLGQ as opposed to LGBTQ after having a talk with Trans woman of colour activist Miss Major Griffin-Gracy. Miss Major asked me to put the “T” at the start of the well know queer and trans acronym because Transgender women are often forgotten and face extreme violence in our society (by queer and straight peoples) as a result of transphobia. And I put the “B” second because bi-sexual people often face discrimination within the queer and trans community as well as the hetero community.

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I acknowledge that I live on the stolen land originally named Turtle Island, now known as Canada; and I thank my many Indigenous brothers, sisters, and Two Spirit siblings for welcoming me into their lives.

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***Kuzushi***

## ***Kuzushi***

### *Kuzushi*

is a Japanese term  
used in the art of Judo  
meaning to place someone  
off balance,  
to decenter them.

Here,  
with the words of these poems,  
in the dojo of my work,  
my writing performs

### *Kuzushi*

on  
white supremacy  
ableism  
rape culture  
homo and trans phobia  
capitalism and patriarchy

### *Kuzushi*

whi te  
suprem a c i st  
able ist  
ra  
p  
is  
t  
ho  
mo  
trans  
pho  
b  
i  
c  
cap  
it  
alist  
pat  
r

## **A Poem Is...**

the laying of ink

the page  
pierced  
line  
after  
line

the writer their own  
audience

the agony of hand,  
muscle, bone  
working toward the elusive

poem

## **Llorar y Llorar**

I'm listening to *El Rey*, the trumpets and violins roar as Vicente Fernandez *canta* what it means to be *un hombre*, *piedras en el camino* didn't stop you, prison stints in *Guatemala, Mexico*, y *El Norte* saw you *rodar y rodar*, and later, we rolled with you, *Jose Cuervo* passed around, sitting on 1980s van seats in your living room, *hablando amor por una mujer*, Antonella *en ese tiempo*, your small hands moving in the air as you said, "When you love a woman you kiss her from the tips of her fingers to the tips of her toes," my 19 year old Latinx idea of romance kicking in, your sweet words adding sugar to our bottled potluck, words of wisdom shared as the white boy in the room who wished he was Brown nodded to everything you said, *con dinero o sin dinero yo hago lo que quiero!*, you were the king of your castle, we knew you came to kill a man, your rep had *hombres* shivering, serving you, agreeing with every word that came out of your mouth, yet I saw sides of you some didn't: *pena, lagrimas, recuerdos de amor perdido*...you and *Jose* had many talks alone, head and bottle tilted back he brought the best and worst out of you, *cuentos de la carcel*, your cure for didlers, men sprawled on the shower floor face down as you and your *mara* pretended you were doing *justicia para los ninos* who got shafted, *perdon carnal* but that was about you not the children, you added to rape culture, you dumped the bottle for a glass pipe, the *piedra* you couldn't roll away from, the last stone on the road was a raw deal in Vancouver, a silver bullet where *Jose* used to fill you up, *no hay que llegar primero pero hay que llegar*, you showed up, give thanks, I'll remember our talks on beat up back seats while *passando la bottella*, memories lasting longer than your blood on the sidewalk, Vicente *hablo la verdad*, for those of us who shared time on your makeshift couch, this poem is to *llorar y llorar*.

**Dear white police officer,**

You've  
tackled me to the ground,  
stepped on my head,  
kneaded me in the balls,  
cut my wrists with your handcuffs,  
left me cuffed and face down in the middle of the road while the rain pelted on me,  
slammed my head into the door frame as you shoved me in the back of your car,  
tried turning my friends and I against each other,  
threatened me with rape,  
called me stupid and...

You've  
snuck up on me,  
came close to running me over,  
illegally searched me,  
put your hands in my pockets and down my pants,  
shoved me against walls and fences,  
sandwiched me between you and your partners and...

You've  
profiled me,  
made assumptions,  
made me strip, spread my ass cheeks, and play with my cock,  
barred me from certain areas in my neighbourhood,  
followed me as I've walked home,  
treated to me like a 3<sup>rd</sup> class citizen,  
made fun of my name and language and disability,  
talked down to my mother,  
left my room in shambles...

Dear white police officer, I didn't go to the institution you said I would. I'm not in Kingston or Millhaven or Joyceville. I'm not the Brown body behind bars you wanted me to be. I'm not your punching bag or statistic anymore. I earned a degree, am now doing a Masters, know my rights, claimed myself a writer, been published, wrote poems for, and read poems, at Osgoode Law School. And I'm erasing my record along with the power you once had over me.

Justly,

Jorge Antonio Vallejos

## ***We Were Supposed To Be Here***

*We were supposed to be here:*

*Boxed,  
Shackled,  
Shipped out.*

*We were supposed to be here:*

*Separated from Advanced students,  
Slotted in  
General and basic.*

*We were supposed to be here:*

*Subsidized housing,  
No dads,  
Moms working three jobs.*

*We were supposed to be here:*

*Faces like ours playing drug dealers and pimps,  
Faces like ours never on the honour roll,  
Faces like ours always on the front page,  
Faces like ours representing rape and rage.*

*We were supposed to be here:*

*Carrying bolt cutters, screwdrivers, and bats,  
Popping ignitions,  
Chopping crack.*

*We were supposed to be here:*

*Black and Brown bodies  
Crammed in cube vans,  
Warehoused for sentencing or bail,  
Pushed through the system  
Programmed to fail.*

*Boxed, Shackled, Shipped out*

*My words are a spiritual, mental and physical breakout!*

## **Which Children?**

Preacher man stands in front of his flock,  
Raising his hands, chin, and voice,  
Praising the Almighty Father  
he says  
the treatment of children has improved vastly  
throughout history because of Christianity,  
and ends with  
“I truly believe that.”

Days prior, Pheasant died.  
I found out on Bloor Street.  
“Complications of diabetes,” I was told.

The colonial train is a miserable ride ending in death.  
The ride in reverse saw Pheasant climax with the sweet stuff,

Prior was alcoholism and poor diet,  
Prior, incarceration as a child, youth, and adult,  
Prior, residential school,  
Prior, the 60s Scoop,  
Prior, setting up apartheid,  
Prior, disease, rape, land theft,  
Prior, white invasion.

Prior to preacher man’s claim was  
Pheasant’s verbal obituary in front of his old Annex watering hole.

Preacher man! Which children are you talking about?

***“No Nos Dejan Dormir”***

says a blonde Chilean woman,  
Mayor of *Providencia*, Chile’s Beverly Hills.  
*Canal 24* shows images of *travestis* at night,  
Groped by drunk men, non-consensual touch not the issue,  
hidden cameras capturing trans women in the big heist:  
pocketing phones & wallets as hard groins launch their attack.

*Travestis* are the problem, not the blonde society

Who won’t

Hire them  
Rent to them  
Show them ‘affection’ during sunlight.

Groped by drunk men  
Hard groins launch their attack,  
Lustful lurking in the shadows,

*Mujeres travestis de color* murdered daily,  
For the few of us who care,

*No nos dejan dormir!*

## Many Died Alone

Almost 7pm, the April sun going down, barely providing light to my page as I read of Ethan dying from the epidemic ignored by Reagan and many after him. Kurt Cobain's voice blasts through the pub, a rainbow flag covers the left corner of the window in front of me, a pint of dark porter in my left hand, I read, "We took him back to New Paltz by ambulance at the end of September, and he died on November 6. Thom was on one side, holding his left hand, Sandra was on the other side holding his right, and I held him around the middle." The paragraph ends and I look away from the page into the light and the multi coloured cloth holding liquid medicine,

Blacks, Browns, Reds—those without insurance on paper or in communal flesh,

Died alone.

No dying with dignity in cottage country; rather, refused ambulance rides and beds in shelters; shunned by family; shown hate by government, media, and the church,

Smells like evil spirit.

## **On The Mourners Bench**

The crowd laughs  
at the Professor's joke.  
We sit listening.

50 years after Vietnam  
and the assassination of Martin Luther King,  
we watch him from pews,  
most of us secular,  
present to challenge the atrocities of war.

We attend all the vigils:  
December 6<sup>th</sup>,  
Missing & Murdered Indigenous Women,  
Trans Day of Remembrance  
Black Lives Matter,  
Pulse Nightclub Massacre...

We, in our funeral garb:  
dark clothing, kufiyahs, buttons, signs.  
Informed by FaceBook posts, tweets, and flyers,  
we stand and march for hours,  
yell, sing, cry; cut our eyes at cops.  
We recognize familiar faces,  
hug hellos and goodbyes,  
and go home.

"Leftists have become professional mourners", he says.  
We laugh a sad laugh from the  
Mourners' bench.

## **Morning Berries**

Every morning berries fill my bowl,  
After a night of hunger there is a hole,  
Not so dark as when those who crawl at dawn,  
Making millions for Dole as human pawns.  
The oats I boil reach heat  
Hot as the working sun,  
Aging backs and rusted knees,  
Bending with Berry after berry,  
Brown bodies slowly beat.  
Fences jumped, highways crossed,  
Feet where a wall is to be built,  
Later in the fields,  
Picking row after row,  
So berries every morning can fill my bowl.

## **Sitting On A Bench On Queen Street**

The bench is west of the opera house. The sun is out but the wind is crisp. A block down is the restaurant I was invited to but can't afford. I people watch and a brother in the struggle smiles, puts out a dab, parks his bike and sits. Quickly the catchup session turns to his recent history of cascading from the top: first ever Black Principal of the school he ran; hiring a Black teacher over a white; accused of [e-s-r-e-v-e-r] "racism"; off work since January with no return date. All the white invites who can afford the menu pass by, wave "Hi" with big grins, as critiques of the academic machine flow from his mouth. The cruelty of titles and hierarchies: class after class, essay after essay, exam after exam, year after year, degree after degree, the next level after the next level, finally, the top, and the trap door falls out from under his feet. "You work so hard, for what?" He says, and then quotes poet Nayyirah Waheed: "...you broke the ocean in half to be here. only to meet nothing that wants you."

## Suspended In Time: Myrtle Beach Summer 2003

We hang on his day off: first real talk he's had in months; first person who looks like him; first person with a name like his; first person with a shared history through blood and bone. Present day equals living in a closet, paid \$100 a week for cleaning the motel I stay at, inch by inch, this after running miles from *la migra* at age 4, caught and turned back, crossing again at age 9, no *coyote*, just his *hermano* and *cien ilegales* turned Brown Jesse Owens' blitzkrieking *la frontera*, Fords and Chryslers zipping around them, screeching to a halt, some rear-ending each other as lanes and speed limits disappear for seconds that seem like days. *Hoy, su unico día libre*, we laugh while he shares *cuentos de triumpho* as we walk side by side down the strip. The sea of gringos is oblivious to us, chillaxing, walking under *el sol* like our ancestors, *hablando Engles, Espanol*, and Spanglish, buying cotton candy while walking the gauntlet of confederate flags and "WANTED" posters with bullseyes circling Bin Laden's face, his eyes watching us. And the only image close to who we are is a t-shirt with Tony Montana holding a thirty-eight special—we don't "want to go to war!" Our own *El Camimo*, two Brown boys suspended in time, feet traveling "The Land of Milk and Honey", *riceses* coming via overpriced Asian sweat shop made sneakers, blonds in bikinis at every turn, and brain freezing slurpees at "Circle K". Egyptian pyramids on green bills laid on the counter, the all-seeing-eye witnesses the racist heckling from the white boy ringing the register and my Brown sidekick tapping my thigh as I bite my lip. Reality showers us under the hot sun. "This is the kinda place where they chain you to a truck and drag you around," he says as we cross the parking lot and head back to our lives.

## Dear Mr. Prime Minister

It's dark in here,  
I don't know where I am or how long I've been here.  
The last thing I remember is leaving work,  
Our local bar, a 30 minute drive from the rez.  
All the oilrig guys party there on the weekend,  
They don't understand consent,  
They don't respect women like me.  
I've gone looking for some of my sisters,  
I've attended vigils up here in the north,  
I'm at every Strawberry Ceremony for #MMIWG on February 14<sup>th</sup> in Calgary,  
I'm sure my community is looking for me now,  
I hope they won't be standing in the cold next February holding my photo,

Happy Canada 150.

I live with a mental disability,  
Nobody wants to hire someone like me,  
Disability pension cut back \$250 per month and stopped providing beds,  
There's a 14 year wait list for subsidized housing,  
Hospitals are disappearing,  
I'm an emergency waiting to happen with  
less and less Emergency rooms available.  
I'm one of thousands living with a disability,  
I said, "living with" not "suffering",  
Save your pity for able bodied folks.

Happy Canada 150

Mr. PM, I'm a man of colour with a PhD driving a cab,  
I have five kids to feed and Uber cut my clientele in half,  
None of your universities recognize my degrees,  
I just applied for a second job as a security guard,  
Last week I took off on a lady who filled my trunk with groceries,  
I had to!

Happy Canada 150

Flashing lights are all around me,  
I wish I could hug myself,  
My strength is gone, the top of my shirt is soaked,  
I feel cold even though it's thirty plus out here,  
My head feels heavy on the road,  
Why did they pull me over?  
Why did they ask me to get out of the car?

I wasn't speeding, my papers are in order,  
My car needs no work.  
I'm supposed to fly back home tomorrow,  
My Mom, the beach, fresh fruit, ackee and salt fish,  
I'm tired, fading, can't write anymore.

Happy Canada 150

*Aniin* PM, I'm doing 30 days for protesting mercury poisoning on my rez,  
I'm related to a quarter of the people in here,  
Almost everyone looks like me,  
And close to everyone I know has been here at least once,  
Is my infant child next?

Happy Canada 150

This is going to be short,  
Floors 12 & 11 have already passed by,  
I hear my husband screaming. I don't know why,  
I'm the one falling.  
The landlord didn't change the locks  
Like he was supposed to.  
And the restraining order is just a piece of paper,  
What I need now is a net!  
I was so happy to come Canada.  
If I knew it would end like this  
I would have stayed home  
To be buried next to my Mother.

Happy Canada 150

Dear Mr. Pay Me Some Fucking Attention,  
My family kicked me out,  
My church said I'm not welcome at youth group anymore,  
My boss let me go because I "freak customers out",  
I bind my chest with duct tape because I can't afford top surgery,  
I work Isabella St. from midnight to 4am, \$60 for every blow,  
FREE for those who 'serve and protect' or I lose my freedom,  
I'm tired of being tired, tired of being tired, tired of...tired.  
My john is fast asleep and I've got a bottle of pills open,  
A bathtub full of hot water and new straight razors,  
This is the last letter I'll be writing.

## **I Am Prepared To Live**

in the face of a president  
who plans to build a wall on my back.

I am prepared to live  
while facing my mirror  
seeing the walls I build around myself  
feeling inferior.

I am prepared to live  
abandoned at the age of two,  
slowly filling the hole,  
'father', never a significant role.

I am prepared to live  
long after Nellie,  
who clung  
to her belief  
that I should be hung.

I am prepared to live  
ignoring predictions by  
social workers,  
teachers and  
preachers.

I am prepared to live  
as police hold guns to my back,  
cuffing and locking me up,  
justifying their attack.

I am prepared to live  
through media bias  
government policies,  
and race riots.

I am prepared to live  
as I step on the *tatami*  
alongside those who call me a *spic*  
and wish forced castration of my dick.

I am prepared to live  
breaking bone after bone  
grappling toward enlightenment,  
the *dojo*, my second home.

I am prepared to live  
through  
betrayal  
bullying  
shame.

I am prepared to live  
through  
ableism  
eugenics  
defamation of my name.

I am prepared to live  
confronting conservative Christian wrath,  
shunning me,  
claiming I'm not on the path.

I am prepared to live  
gentle and yielding  
doing my best not to frown  
as 'the man' continually tries to slam me down.

I am prepared to live  
smiling with  
disability,  
difference,  
and little  
cash.

I am prepared to live  
dropping Margaret Sangram  
via telegram  
my words of life  
covering her dust and ash.

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**Poetry**

**On**

**The**

**Edge**

*"No to Silence... To die would be to stop writing."*  
— Javier Valdez Cardenas (1967-2017)

I live in the place of the in between. I live in the space of being in between things, not quite planted anywhere—in flux. Victor Turner refers to liminality as being “movement between fixed points and is essentially ambiguous, unsettled, and unsettling,” (Turner, 1974, p. 274). I write from the place of the unsettled. My poetry aims to unsettle, to be unsettling.

Arthur Van Gennep wrote of the “liminal phase” in the book *rites de passage* referring to “rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position and age,” (Turner, 1969, p. 94); Turner later coined the term liminality. The rites of passage were categorized into several stages by Van Gennep. The most important of these are: separation, transition, and reincorporation. My experience of liminality, my own state of being is that of a constant separation without reincorporation: being mixed race; born a citizen to an immigrant woman; raised by a single woman in a two-parent society; being Indigenous, but not to the land I live on; having an invisible disability in an ableist culture; speaking two colonial languages; having academic and street educations; being a progressive man in a hyper-masculine society; being a bibliophile who writes on a laptop. The examples above encompass my ambiguity and my permanent feeling of being unsettled.

My liminality has much to do with race and disability. Being mixed race, of-colour, and living with a disability, I am othered, meaning I am not of the norm—white and able bodied—and I am often reminded I am on the outside. Recently, I approached an

elderly woman who was the cook of the nursery I spent many years at as a child and was reminded of my otherness in the society I live in:

“Do you remember me,” I said. “It’s Jorge.”

“Broken bones!” she said.

I was not a person to her. I was my disease—Osteo-genesis Imperfecta (OI) also known as “brittle bones disease”. I was my disability as opposed to a person who lives with a disability. My race and disability intersect; I face multiple oppressions because of being a non-white person living with a disability in what Mary Jo Deegan calls a “disabling society”, (Deegan, 2001), and what bell hooks refers to as “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy”, (Personal Communication, hooks 2016). In their seminal article “Physical Disability and Social Liminality”, Robert and Yolanda Murphy argue that disabled peoples are “in a liminal state, caught and fixated in a passage through life that has left them socially ambivalent and ill defined, condemned to a kind of seclusion,” (Murphy, 1988 p, 235). And in terms of disability and the stages proposed by Van Gennep and incorporated by Turner, the Murphy’s tackle this issue well: “Being a patient or temporarily sick is a “transition”. Being disabled is not,” (Murphy, 1988, p. 238). Therefore, there is no reincorporation as mentioned earlier.

For Victor Turner to be liminal is to be socially dead and not yet born again. It is to have no status. The Murphy’s expand on this: “Disability is also an in between state, for the person is neither sick nor well, neither fully alive nor quite dead,” (Murphy, 1988, p. 238). Turner writes of liminality in terms of being “betwixt and between” positions, (Turner, 1969, p. 95). Often, I am betwixt and between being “Jorge the person”, and a weak skeletal structure who occupies space in Toronto. Depending on who I am

interacting with, and whether they know I live with OI, I am in this state of movement: Jorge to disabled body, disabled body to Jorge, or with those who know me completely, Jorge the person who lives with OI.

This is where I disagree with Turner who views liminality as a state that passes as opposed to a constant state. Living liminality is why I am at the margins of a society that sees black and white and no in-betweens. And being in the margin I challenge the status quo, those who take centre stage and dictate who we are to be and how we are to live. I am on the outside looking in. Black academic bell hooks describes this position of being on the margins as a “space of refusal, where one can say no to the colonizer, no to the down presser, (hooks, 1990). I watch from the margins and use poetry to challenge oppression that comes from the centre. As a poet on the margins I agree with hooks when she writes, “Our words are not without meaning, they are an action, a resistance,” (hooks, 1990). Words also come with responsibility. There is power in being able to string words together into poems which people read, think about, remember, and share. With much power comes much responsibility. In what follows I discuss what it means to me to be a writer. I discuss my beginnings, inspirations, laying down ink, every line needing to be a grenade pin.

## Beginnings

I remember the moment I wanted to be a writer. It was grade five and I was sitting at the same wooden desk that sits in my room today. I had just finished reading “This Can’t Be Happening at MacDonald Hall” by Gordon Korman. I was elated after enjoying every sentence and laughing out loud with almost every page read. Holding the book in my hand, sitting sideways at my desk facing the wall and letting the sun shine on the right side of my body, I read Korman’s bio at the back of the book and the amazing truth about him writing the beloved novel in my hand for a grade seven school project. Right there I decided I wanted to be a writer. I told myself if he could write a novel at such a young age so could I. The book still sits on the shelf of my desk with many other novels by Korman.

Becoming the writer I am today began with me being a reader at a young age. Being a reader started because my Mother began reading to me in my infancy. After completing two years of a four-year Literature degree, my Mother had to drop out because she couldn’t afford to be a student. She always loved the arts: books, films, and plays. And I was privileged to live a ten-minute walk away from Wychwood Library, a branch of the Toronto Public Library system. As an infant and child, my Mother would take me to the library twice a week. At first, she would borrow books for herself and picture books for me. As I got older, she would take me to the library to attend performances, talks, courses, and look around for books to borrow as well as hangout and read.

We have always been a two-person family. My Mother is a mixed race—Basque, Chinese, and *Mestizo*—woman of colour who identifies as Latina. Born in Peru she

speaks *Castellano* a dialect of Spanish. The person who helped make me (I do not use the word “father” for that is a title that has to be earned) is a Lebanese man. I am a mix of Arab, Basque, Chinese, and Indigenous blood. I come from communities of great writers and storytellers, and I’m now continuing the tradition.

For several years, my Mother was left with five to fifteen dollars spending money a month after paying rent and buying food and other necessities. Our local library was free to use, and free to take out books and records, so it was the most affordable entertainment available to us. I borrowed books on a weekly basis. As I grew older I wanted to own the books I read and enjoyed. When my Mother found work with better pay in the middle of my grade school years, she started to buy me books from several now defunct bookstores: Coles, Lichtman’s, and The World’s Biggest Bookstore. A visit to The World’s Biggest Bookstore was to become a tradition every time we went downtown. It was my biblio Wonderland; rows and rows of books with seating available; other bibliophiles walking around, burying their noses in books, discussing books with each other in their preferred sections of the store, and of course, buying books. Each trip to The World’s Biggest Bookstore took thirty minutes to one hour and I always left with a new book.

Grade five, the same year I started reading Gordon Korman, is the year I started writing book reviews every month for English class, and it was the year I started buying books through Scholastic via snail mail. Reading a book a month for class was a pleasure. And writing reviews were more fun than work. I reviewed “This Can’t Be Happening at MacDonald Hall” for my grade five class. With it being such an important book in my life, I now wish I had kept the review.

As a teen I discovered skipping class in high school. And like the French writer Jean Genet, I became a thief. I started stealing bikes and car stereos. These were my first of several moneymaking ventures. I would often spend my money on food, movies, and books. After selling a stereo for one-hundred and fifty dollars, sometimes accompanied by a sound amplifier or speakers (which meant more money for my best friend and I depending on the brand, size, and wattage), I would go to The World's Biggest Bookstore and buy a book or two or three. At that age, I moved from reading Gordon Korman to true crime. I was obsessed with the Italian mafia and Colombian cartel. My hero was Pablo Escobar. And my desire was to work my way up the crime ladder to his status one day. Sadly, this is a dream for many young men of colour.

On one bookstore adventure during class time, I ran into my first bibliophile. I did not know the term then but I knew a booklover when I saw one. He was a South Asian man in his fifties riding the subway beside me. I had just bought "Kings of Cocaine" by Guy Gugliotta and Jeff Leen and was reading it. He had four bags full of books. The bags were so full the corners of books were pushing out like arrows ready to pierce whoever tried removing them. I had a weird respect for this man so I started a conversation with him. He told me he read three hours a day, about forty books a month, and spent close to three-hundred dollars on books monthly. I listened as I held my book about murderous drug dealers who I admired. Yet, I was enamored by this man who was the complete opposite of the drug lords of my books. We parted ways with smiles and cordial goodbyes. I can still see his face and his bags of books. I wanted to read like him, as much as him, and own as many, or more, books than him. And I wanted to be the writer of one of the books in his bags bought at The World's

Biggest Bookstore. I wonder if that was a crossroad? Perhaps in that moment of desire are the seeds of my decision to be at an academic institution as opposed to penal institution as I write this.

For a time, I turned in the direction of continuing the juvenile quest of being a kingpin as opposed to following Korman. And I still did not attempt to write. But I read. I read books I bought; books bought for me; and books I borrowed from the library. And the love of walking the isles of every bookstore downtown was, and still is, in me. I never saw the man on the subway again. I wish I could meet him now as an adult who is more read, a person who could discuss literature with him, share my writing, and shop books together. Today, I read crime fiction as opposed to committing crimes. I learn the craft from writers more experienced than I. When riding the subway that day I was reading about men in a trade I wished to be proficient at. Now I can write the story I dreamed living as a teen with no horrific repercussions for my actions. I can go to those places while sitting in the comfort of my home.

I was ten years old when I read Gordon Korman's bio and decided I wanted to write. I was fourteen when I met the bibliophile on the subway. It took five years after that subway encounter for me to start the hard work of doing something truly creative. And it took place in my head. I was not ready to commit to putting pen to pad, or fingers to a qwerty keyboard, or to seeing my story on a page. The final impetus was the death of a friend, Giovanni.

He was a gangster I looked up to. A short man with a very violent past, I met him after he arrived in Toronto with a mission. His mission was to kill his brother-in-law. When he drank he shared stories of prison stints in the four countries he'd lived in:

Guatemala, Mexico, USA, Canada. Giovanni told us of the violence he saw in prison, the things he and his gang did to child molesters, and the rules that exist inside. At the same time, he taught me about love and romanticism, and the point when you know you really love a woman, sharing with me how and what it is when you love a woman. He'd tilt his head, and a bottle in hand, back, tequila going down his throat and later unscripted poetic prose would come out of his mouth that I'll never forget: "You kiss her from the tips of her fingers to the tips of her toes." Giovanni died on a Vancouver sidewalk after being shot in the stomach during a drug deal gone wrong. My words about him were imprinted on my brain for a while, longer than his blood on the sidewalk, but not long enough for me to remember my words honouring him and our short time together. Much later I wrote these lines for him in my poem *Llorar y Llorar* in part of my chapbook "*Kuzushi*" (2017):

"...*con dinero o sin dinero yo hago lo que quiero!*, you were the king of your castle, we knew you came to kill a man, your rep had *hombres* shivering, serving you, agreeing with every word that came out of your mouth..."

## Part I: Inspirations

### Bacca: Crossing Fences

Apache and Chicano poet Jimmy Santiago Bacca is a writer who shares a journey that is similar to mine. I not only enjoy reading and learning from his work but I also recognize that he is someone I can relate to. He is mixed race, speaks Spanish, looks like me, and he was incarcerated during his youth. Bacca has one of those “comeback” stories that inspire people. He learned how to read and write in prison, and is now a highly respected poet in his country, the United States of America. And he does not write to please those in power. If there ever is a first Mexican American or Chicano President of the USA, Bacca won’t be asked to write and read a poem at his or her inauguration. His words on paper challenge colonialism and all its ills: racism, land theft, the prison industrial complex, the erasure of Indigenous and Latino peoples, and more. Bacca writes, “...I don’t, as some poets do, slap their ass and grin a toothy smile flirting with the audience to lure their appeal, with politically correct bullshit...” (Bacca, 2002, p. 87). Bacca does not shy away from talking about the wars, whether in prison, the streets, academia, the literary world, and history between Blacks and Mexicans. Unlike many who do not want to talk about the ways in which the binary of black and white excludes those who are brown and their struggles, he writes of those Latinos and Mestizos and Indigenous folks forgotten in the blanket of white vs. Black that covers America.

In his thirty-four-part poem “Thirteen Mexicans”, a mix of prose and stanzas, Bacca writes of the exclusion of Mexicans in the land that was taken from them by the Anglo-American republic of the USA. He writes about the consequences of crossing a

border that should not exist. He starts with the hypocrisy of America and its celebration of Columbus Day. Bacca also honours those who are nameless, those who die every day while trying to come to America to work. Poem sixteen of “Thirteen Mexicans” is the poem that inspired the book’s title. Thirteen Mexicans dead on the highway after just paying, and being led into the promised land by a coyote:

yet this morning no one thinks about them,  
no one cares who they were, what songs they had in their hearts,  
what their dreams were, who their parents were,  
just a bunch of wetbacks—  
(Bacca, 2002, p. 98).

Later connecting racism to this colonial celebration, he defines it:

Racism is about privilege, undeserved and unearned authority, tyrannical power, wealth amassed corruptly, sniveling lace-handkerchief judges smacking their parched lips, impatiently clocking the minutes before they can leave for the country-club cocktail hour,  
(Bacca, 2002, p. 71).

Bacca honours and writes about the Latinos and Mestizos constantly forgotten such as Cheyenne Segoya who was assassinated for teaching George Jackson the techniques of subversion and organizing in San Quentin prison. In doing so, he points to more than essentialized racial identities. He points to the ways in which each struggle encodes and is contingent on another. He points to the potential of cross racial anti-racial solidarity demonstrating in the words of the old union song: “Touch one, Touch all”, (Guerillas, 2007 July)

## Monette: Frantic Honouring and Remembering

My poems are influenced by poets I love and re-read. I seek out work that deals with the experiences of those on the margins. I seek out the work of those who write about what it means when you cannot re-assimilate. Recently, white gay writer and AIDS activist Paul Monette (1945-1995) has been a great influence even though he is no longer here because he is dead: he is an influence who speaks to me from that ultimate liminality via poetry and prose; an influence who will be with me as long as I can pick up a book and pen to read and write, re-read and re-write. Monette writes from a place of separation and faithfully records the brutal anxiety that can result from a threat of permanent liminality.

Monette's "The Worrying" is a frantic poem that grabs the reader from the first line which jumps off from the title: "ate me alive day and night". Later, Monette writes:

...they lie who says it's over  
Rog it hasn't stopped at all are you okay  
does it hurt what can I do still still I  
think if I worry enough I'll keep you near  
the night before Thanksgiving I had this  
panic to buy the plot on either side of us  
so we won't be cramped that yard of extra grass  
would let us breathe THIS IS CRAZY RIGHT...  
(Monette, 1994, p. 34).

The poem works like a Judo match. Similar to a judoka who grabs his or her opponent's *gi* (uniform), performing *kuzushi*—pulling them forward and taking them off balance—loading them on his or her back as they bend down, their hands gripped tight on his or her opponents collar and sleeve and transferring their hold on to the opponent's arm after placing their bicep under their opponent's armpit while turning in to them, seeing the opponent's feet elevate off the ground as they surf on the throwers back, head no

longer pointing toward the ceiling but doing the opposite, their body heading toward the mat after the parabolic curve is passed, the point of no return, finally seeing their back land on the mat for an *ippon* (the end of a match seeing the highest possible score achieved). “The Worrying” is relentless. Like a judo throw, “The Worrying” sees no pause, no interruption; no line breaks or commas or periods; no paragraphs; just one piece of writing that starts fast and ends with the reader exhausted and in appreciation and contemplation.

A judoka takes his or her stance, takes a grip of the opponents *gi* and pulls or pushes them off balance to where he or she wants the opponent to be, lifts them in the air taking them for a ride, and drops them for the finish. Monette’s stance is him sitting at his desk; his grip is his dominant hand holding his pen; his words pull you in, move you off centre, and word by word Monette reels you in closer to him, he whispers a buildup in your ear that has the effect of a megaphone yelling at the heterosexual world, especially those in power. And when his message is delivered in “The Worrying”, like a losing fighter, you, the reader, are on your back thinking, “What just happened?”. Judo is an art as is writing. Time is what develops a Judoka and a writer. You put yourself out there in both arts. The risk in Judo is being thrown, pinned, choked or having your arm locked into submission. With writing, for those who choose to share their work at readings or in publications, you risk being critiqued, judged, or slammed. When I write I share my ideas which are not always popular: challenging oppression. And I hope that while doing so, like Monette, I pull the reader in, keep their attention, and add a new view to their way of thinking.

Transgender Reverend Cindy Bourgeois of the United Church of Canada says her goal via her sermons and ministry is to “comfort the uncomforted and make uncomfortable those who live in comfort,” (personal communication, August 2017). “The Worrying” does this. Monette takes you on his journey of caring for Roger, his love, who is dying as the world watches thousands like him die of AIDS. Monette’s writing practice translates to his care for Roger, the re-writing process now becomes re-cleaning: “I’d go around the house with a rag of ammonia...faucets doorknobs the phone everything lethal thing a person grips and leaves his prints on scrubbed my hands till my fingers cracked washed apples ten times ten...”, (Monette, 1994, p. 3). Monette has turned mad scientist frantically going around his house cleaning everything ten times over. Monette writes as if talking to Roger as well as the reader, “...I was so far more gone than you nuts in fact...” Roger is sick with AIDS and Monette is sick with worry. Both are in a liminal space: will Roger survive? Will Monette be infected? Will all of America’s gay men disappear as the United States government watches and does nothing? Monette is present but not. Day by day, Roger slips closer to the unknown as Monette is possibly (and later confirmed) watching his very own future through the life of his lover: “...us in the vale of borrowed time...” Us being he and Roger and every gay man infected. Borrowed time would be the title for the award-winning memoir Monette wrote of caring for Roger who he describes in “The Worrying” as “...you with the dagger at your jugular...” The dagger being AIDS, the right-wing Christian church, and the state.

Although many of Monette’s readers do not know the reality of living with someone who has, or having, AIDS themselves, Monette brings the familiarity of the everyday to the reader so as to bring some sort of understanding: cleaning, caring, and

as the title states, worrying. There is also the reality of death which no living person escapes, and the loss, or near loss, of a loved one. The use of language to demonstrate Monette's love for Roger is a challenge to the state which ignored the AIDS epidemic because of hetero-patriarchy and the vilification of gay men by the Right Wing Christian Church. Monette shows gay men are more than bathhouse culture. Yes, there is lust. And yes, there is love. And the labour of caring which is often seen as the role of a female. Monette shows how men can be, and are, caregivers:

...how did  
the meningitis get in where did I slip up  
what didn't I scour I'd have swathed the city  
in gauze to cushion you...,  
(Monette, 1994, p. 34).

As Monette takes you on this ride, on his back, he the writer and thrower, you listen while suspended in air, and as you curve with your head moving toward the ground, Monette slips in a line letting you know Roger is no more: "...my stolen pal...". Is the poem's title all the poem is about? Is "The Worrying" the abomination gay men were touted as by the church and state? Monette ends the poem showing the reader the purpose and truth behind his words:

my stolen pal what do you need is it  
sleep like sleep you want a pillow a cool  
drink oh my one safe place there must be  
something just say what it is and it's yours,  
(Monette, 1994, p. 35).

## **Chrystos: Anger, Inciting and Inspiring**

In Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism*, he argues for the importance of broadening the canon of English literature, to include the liminal two thirds of the world - the excluded subjects of history, (Said, 1994). He, like many others of his generation fought for the decolonization of culture and argued that this must accompany the reclaiming of colonized territory. Said proposes that "the slow and often bitterly disputed recovery of geographical territory which is at the heart of decolonization is preceded – as empire had been — by the charting of the cultural territory", (Said, 1994, p. 209). That is, after fighting against intrusion the colonized must mount ideological resistance. The first stage of this depends on the re-establishment of the community that the colonizers have ruptured and he argues that this depends on restoring what has been suppressed in the world of the colonized by imperialism (Said, 1994). He writes: "To achieve recognition is to re-chart and then occupy the place in imperial cultural forms reserved for subordination, to occupy it self-consciously, fighting for it on the very same territory once ruled by a consciousness that assumed the subordination of a designated inferior", (Said, 1994). The humiliating wounds of the past become an instigation for different practices which lead to the reimagining of a different future. These narratives are what Said calls the guiding imagination of the anticolonial movement. He contends that: "To become aware of oneself as belonging to a subject people is the founding insight of anti-imperialist nationalism", (Said, 1994, p. 214). For him, intellectual and cultural debates within anticolonial movements enable re-conceptions of society and culture that will transform old beliefs and injustices.

In many ways Said's notion of restorative imagination applies to the work of Chrystos who has for many decades insisted on that process of re-occupying the site of imperial imagination by re-writing the history of indigenous people. My copy of "Not Vanishing" by Two-Spirit Poet Chrystos of the Menominee nation has been the most influential book in my life as a poet. It sits to my right as I write this essay. Published by Press Gang Publishers in 1988, Chrystos' words ring true today. Poems like "Dear Mr. President", "In The Brothel Called America", "No More Metaphors", "No Public Safety", "There Is A Man Without Fingerprints", and "I Walk In The History of My People" have guided my journey as a poet, and continue to lead me on this path of Master's studies I am on. Why? Because what she challenged with her words almost thirty years ago are still colonial realities that exist today and that I now fight: violence against Indigenous peoples, women, sexworkers, peoples of colour and TBGLQ folks, disabled peoples, immigrants and more.

I first learned about Chrystos in a recommended reading list in the now defunct Indigenous youth magazine "REDWIRE". I stumbled upon the copy I now own at the First Nations House Library at University of Toronto. Seeing the spine of the book with the title and name of author seemed familiar. When pulling it out of the stack on the shelf I realized the book I had in my hands was the one listed in the article. The cover gave it away: red with black letters and a white medicine wheel painted in the middle, I saw many things at once, the main being continuation. The words "Not Vanishing" on top of the circle symbolize, and add to, Chrystos' introduction:

Our rituals, stories & religious practices have been stolen and abused, as  
has our land...My purpose is to make it clear & and inescapable, what the

actual material conditions of our lives are. Hunger, infant mortality, forced sterilization, treaty violations, the plague of alcohol and drugs, ridiculous jail terms, denial of civil rights, radiation poisoning, land theft...harassment & death...are realities we face. [We] work for our lives to continue in our own Ways...we are not Vanishing Americans, (Chrystos, 1988, introduction).

The final sentence is the most powerful. When considering the title of the book, looking at its cover, and reading the poems held within the book's pages, the word "brilliant!" spews out of my mouth. The words "Not Vanishing" can be seen as a response to the work of Edward Curtis, a white American photographer whose photographic collection "The Vanishing Race" (<http://100photos.time.com/photos/edward-curtis-vanishing-race>) appeared at the turn of the century. Curtis' goal was to document the traditional cultures of Indigenous peoples of North America which he argued were "disappearing." His images of rituals, ceremonies, clothing, and his portraits of individuals provided an extensive catalogue of Indigenous societies at the time. His work, while singular, is however extremely controversial since many of the images seem to insist on Indigenous extinction and to associate Indigeneity with sadness and loss, with inscrutable spirituality and difference. Given the context at the time, his work contributes to the myth of extinction that haunts Indigenous presence in contemporary North America. While there is evidence that Indigenous deaths at the turn of the century exceeded the death rate, Curtis work has provoked Indigenous artists to talk back to these images and to assert the fact that while genocidal acts took place, Indigenous people are indeed very much present and still fighting for the land, water, and justice.

Photographer Jeff Thomas produced a series of images addressing what it is like to live in a society where Indigenous people are seen as “vanished” and, or, inhabit a repertoire of stereotypes (Thomas, April 2014). In his collection of photos “The Vanishing Race”, named after, and a challenge to, Edward Curtis’ collection of the same name, Thomas includes a picture of a cigar store Indian called “Cigar Stores: Cheers Indian”. The wooden statue sits outside a cigar store on McCaul Street in downtown Toronto. I’ve walked by it many times. And I took a photo of it for an essay on appropriation of culture for an anthropology class in my undergraduate studies at University of Toronto. The statue is a reference to Indigenous peoples no longer existing. It is a re-affirmation of Curtis’ racist assumption and the societal anachronistic view of Indigenous peoples: brown, dark haired, big and strong, and sporting feathers and a peace pipe. The statue is of an Indigenous man holding his right hand to his head in salutation form, or looking off into the distance which supports the colonial notion of empty land used to justify colonialism and land theft. It’s also referencing the benevolent ‘good Indian’, the yes man, the sidekick to the white man such as Tonto was to the Lone Ranger.

As mentioned above, in her introduction to “Not Vanishing”, a direct challenge to Edward Curtis, Chrystos writes, “We are not Vanishing Americans,” (Chrystos, 1988, no page number available). Many of Chrystos’ poems elude to, and refute, the colonial archaic American psyche of the Indian wearing loin cloths and carrying a bow and arrow such as the statue on McCaul Street. In “I Am Not Your Princess” Chrystos alludes to the myth of Princess Pocahontas when she states,

I won’t chant for you

I admit no spirituality to you  
I will not sweat with you or ease your guilt with fine turtle tales  
I will not wear dancing clothes to read poetry...  
(Chrystos, 1988, p. 66).

There is an ideology that if Indigenous peoples do not practice the above they are not really Indigenous. To be Indigenous in the white colonial gaze is to be a mythic figure: to heal peoples, shapeshift, and be one with nature. And if an Indigenous person does practice traditional ways they are expected to perform them for white people. The above stereotypes are the 'Indian' that white North American society wants: humble, quiet, obedient, nurturing, pious, and safe. Feeling such pressures Chrystos writes, "If you tell me one more time that I'm wise I'll throw up on you... If you ever tell me again how strong I am I'll lay down on the ground & moan so you'll see at last my human weakness like your own... There is no magic," (Chrystos, 1988, p. 67).

Curtis Edwards portrayed Indigenous peoples as vanishing. Jeff Thomas and Chrystos show that Indigenous peoples are still here. A large portion of North America views there being one way to be Indigenous: that of the past. Not only does Chrystos say "we are not vanishing" she sums up the racist view of extinction that is still present. She writes,

Look at my heart  
not your fantasies,  
(Chrystos, 1988, p. 66).

Chrystos' poetry responds to eurocentric misrepresentation by charting the history of violence against Indigenous people. Her poems inspire because they incite the reader to action. "I walk in the History of my people" demonstrates how anger, often seen as a

negative emotion, can act as a source of inspiration. This is so because it brings into being a call for justice. She writes:

My knee is wounded so badly that I limp constantly.  
Anger is my crutch  
(Chrystos, 1988, p. 7)

This poem addresses the history that has resulted in the misrepresentation of Indigenous history by literally re-memembering it. For the African American writer Toni Morrison memory implied occupying the site of that original hurt to continued opposition and to create a new narrative from the perspective of those who experienced the wound of colonization (Zinnser, 1998). Chrystos' work is a direct challenge to the ways in which the history of colonialism has been written so as to position Indigenous people as defeated primitive victims. It honours her ancestors, and her people today as well as tomorrow, but the poem's brilliance lies in Chrystos' clever use of the word and action "walk." Here she recalls the Cherokee Trail of Tears, recalls the agony of re-location and is written through how she feels physically, specifically in her knees. "Knee" here is both literal and a metaphorical reference to the body politic; different parts of the body are referenced—joints, tendons, and marrow—all pointing to the trauma caused by colonialism and how it affects the bodies of Indigenous people. Chrystos shows us the after effects such as bleeding, puss, swelling, and scars. She is showing us how colonialism is an attack not only of nations and systems, but also to the human body and individual people and how it hurts:

My knee is so badly wounded no one will look at it  
The puss of the past oozes from every pore  
The infection has gone on for at least three hundred years.  
(Chrystos, 1988, p. 7).

Chrystos is saying she is walking in the history, present, and future of her peoples. “Knee” here is both literal and the resignification of a historical reference to the massacre at Wounded Knee. First, it demonstrates the embodied consequences of racial capitalism which marks the body in material ways and scripts racialized communities into particular roles or spaces in the hierarchy of domination. Historical oppressions affect contemporary life in embodied ways; Chrystos’ line of “three hundred years” demonstrates this. The long history of colonialism haunts today’s reality in embodied ways. Chrystos’ knee in the poem can be, and is, many other things for different peoples: addiction, sexual violence, homelessness, illnesses like diabetes; all these can intersect for one person. Colonialism runs deep is what Chrystos is showing us. It has eaten into the marrow of her bones and into the materiality of our lives. The effects are not always evident to dominant groups. They show up in the present in unrecognizable things we consider ordinary— pencils, names of cities, gas stations.

In the scars of my knee you can see  
children torn from their families  
bludgeoned into government schools,  
(Chrystos, 1988, p. 7).

At a second level her use of the knee references the “Wounded Knee Massacre” of 1890 in which hundreds of Lakota people (including women and children) were massacred by the US Army in what is now South Dakota. New contexts of meaning come into being through her use of the word and its many meanings. Her use of the word knee here is a deliberate contestation of colonial history achieved through what critic Mary Louise Pratt calls ‘code switching’ (Mooneeram, 2009, p. 145), because it

moves between references to two worlds, that of the everyday body and that of the Indigenous body politic. It flips between two cultural worlds. The impulse to survival and continued resistance is revealed at the poem's end where she writes,

My knee is wounded  
see  
how am I still walking.  
(Chrystos, 1988, p. 7)

Chrystos is saying she is walking in the history, present, and future of her peoples. She occupies compound temporality which defies the linear time on which colonization is based. Brilliant. And sad. The poem was published 29 years ago and the same realities are happening today as I write. Sadness in this case can become an impetus for action in the present. Chrystos' poem inspired my response via the poem "Which Children" in "*Kuzushi*", about Pheasant, a sweatlodge brother of mine who passed on this year, of which I share a portion here:

The colonial train is a miserable ride ending in death.  
The ride in reverse saw Pheasant climax with the sweet stuff.  
(2017)

To explore and understand Chrystos' poems one must look at land theft as it is the basis of all Chrystos' work; and theft of Indigenous land is central to the ongoing colonial process. Removing Indigenous peoples from their lands takes them away from their culture and way of life. Indigenous peoples globally have a common belief: "We are the land, the land is us." To separate a people from their land is to separate them from themselves. In his talk "Environment, Race, and Nation Re-considered: Reflections on Aboriginal Land Claims in Canada" (2003), Canadian geographer Peter J. Usher describes the Canadian governments continual acquisition of Indigenous lands as "a

continuing process of encroachment on (and sometimes the transformation of) their traditional territories, and restriction of their customary livelihood. Examples Usher gives are the relocation of peoples, polluting of rivers, and restrictions on fishing and hunting, (Usher, 2003). Essentially, a peoples cultural, mental, physical, and spiritual survival. Chrystos writes “I Walk In The History Of My People”:

In my marrow the swollen hands of my people who are not allowed to  
to hunt  
to move  
to be,  
(Chrystos, 1988, p. 7).

One current example is the Grassy Narrows First Nations community in northern Ontario, Canada who have been living with polluted waters for close to fifty years as a result of illegal dumping by the Reed Paper company. Ninety percent of the community’s members have mercury poisoning as a result, ([Report Suggesting Mercury, 2017](#)). This community has had their land taken from them, relocated to where they are now, and living with mercury poisoning as a result of a company established by settler colonialism.

In “Social Determinants of Indigenous Health”, a book focusing on Australian Aborigine peoples, sociologists Maggie Walter and Gavin Mooney write, “Given the importance of land in Indigenous culture, the upheaval of Indigenous people from ‘their country’...cannot be good for their health and well-being,” (Carson, 2007, p. 158). To be relocated is an injustice in itself and a hazard to the health of the person and their

community. To be placed where environmental racism happens such as the peoples of Grassy Narrows compounds the ill effects of colonial land theft: removal, segregation, apartheid, isolation, poverty, poisoning... The colonial reality of the Grassy Narrows community brings to mind a lecture at University of Toronto in 2006 given by Indigenous poet Sherman Alexie who described the reservation system when saying, "They put us there so we'd die," (Personal Communication, Alexie 2006). In her poem "I Walk In The History Of My People", Chrystos compliments Alexie's observation:

In my marrow are hungry faces  
who live on the land whites don't want,  
(Chrystos, 1988, p. 7).

There is a well-known story, now the title of a book, among Indigenous peoples and their allies who fight Canada's ongoing land theft process, that took place in what is now known as north-western British Columbia. A group of Tsimshian peoples engaged in a standoff with Canadian foresters trying to claim land for the government. After much discussion one Tsimshian community member asked the foresters, "If this is your land where are your stories?", (Chamberlin, 2000, p. 127). Similarly, the Aboriginies of what is now known as Australia believe, "Our story is in the land", (Carson, 2007, p. 179). Chrystos, in her monumental book "Not Vanishing" is telling her stories. And she makes the connection of land to peoples. And not just her nation, but all the Indigenous nations in what is now known as United States of America who have been killed, relocated, fenced off, imprisoned, and today still experience the effects of colonialism in different forms.

When Chrystos writes “children torn from their families” she is writing of American Indian boarding schools, the equivalent of Canada’s residential school system which Pheasant experienced and which I explore in my poem “Which Children”. These are examples of a double removal in the colonial land theft process: relocation and isolation followed by child imprisonment. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson describes Canada’s residential schools as “a strategy used by Canada to break the connection between Indigenous peoples and our lands, so the state could access the land for settlement and for natural resources, (Simpson, 2016). Chrystos’ line of Indigenous children being “torn” coincides with Simpson who writes:

“By taking our children and holding them hostage, the federal government truncated what Indigenous parents were willing to do to resist the most devastating aspects of colonialism. By breaking the intimate connection between children and their families, their culture, their language and their land, the state was attempting to assimilate Indigenous peoples into Canadian society and eliminate barriers to natural resources and land.”

Simpson writes in detail what Chrystos does succinctly when writing of her knee being wounded and walking her land. Chrystos uses metaphor and lets the reader do some work. She is walking in the history of her people; she is walking on her land; Indigenous land which was, and continues to be threatened; land which was, and is, fought for; land which is central to Indigenous life and ways of being. If, as Said argues, imperialism depends on a form of geographic violence, then Chrystos work is a way of dismantling that imperial map so as to dispute the terms on which it is founded.

Chrystos impels me to write poems such as “*No Nos Dejan Dormir*” looked at in detail below. Chrystos incited in me the will, want, and need to be an ally to women and TBLGQ peoples. And not in a first wave feminist fashion. I’m referring to Indigenous women, women of colour, immigrant women, refugee women, queer women, disabled women, and sexworkers. The activism around allyship to transgender women came later. Chrystos, although very progressive, did not write of trans women in “Not Vanishing”. There was no mainstream Trans-consciousness at that time; there is one building slowly today, but not one I would call mainstream although we do have stars such as Janet Mock and Laverne Cox. Transgender women of colour are murdered daily around the globe with no real importance given to their taken lives. The first week of 2017 saw two Trans women of colour, one Indigenous and one Black, murdered in the United States in two separate places: Jamie Lee Wounded Arrow, 28, of Sioux Falls, South Dakota, and Mesha Caldwell, 41, of Canton, Mississippi. Jamie Lee Wounded Arrow was originally from Pine Ridge Reservation, the poorest place in the USA; Chrystos’ words came to mind as I heard Jamie’s name.

Every time I read “There Is A Man Without Fingerprints” I am left in awe. I stop and breathe and think about what I have just read. I get goosebumps. I feel like I learned something. I feel Chrystos’ words in my arms, belly, and chest. This is the power of poetry. This is what a poem can do. This is what poetry does! At the same time, Chrystos writes at the end of “There Is A Man Without Fingerprints”:

This is not a poem. it’s a newspaper      a warning written quickly,  
(Chrystos, 1988, p. 11)

Ironically, I wrote “*No Nos Dejan Dormir*” after watching the Chilean news and seeing their vilification of Transgender women. Upper middle-class people complaining about

the invasion of Trans women in their neighbourhood, these Trans women being sex workers selling services at night. This is where Chrystos' words push me to write such poems. A former prostitute (her words not mine), Chrystos vilifies the trade not the women, and advocates for the safety of sex workers. Seeing as how the state, and most governments, do not see Transgender women as human, their murders often go unsolved. And although for many people sexwork is a choice for Trans women, there are few opportunities for employment outside of the nightly trade. So, while Chrystos never mentioned Trans women in her monumental collection, she did write of sexworkers and because of her words I learned to see sexworkers in a different light: to see them as human and not objects; to see them as lives to be valued and not disposable; to see them as people in our society. Over the years I have moved away from Chrystos and her belief that sexwork, which she calls "prostitution", is all bad. I now know that sexwork can be a choice, and that in such instances, it is a job and not the forced slavery that Chrystos pegs all sexwork to be. Chrystos also focuses on cis-gendered women. Sexwork has been a trade applied by many peoples of different genders and sexualities for centuries; here is where I see Chrystos had a narrow lens in challenging oppression.

The first six lines of Chrystos' "No More Metaphors", a poem about sexwork and the violence that is part of the job, depict the life so well I see the Chilean news piece that sparked "*No Nos Dejan Dormir*". Chrystos writes:

To be a [sexworker] is to walk cold wet streets  
in a dangerous night dependent  
on the hunger of strangers                      vulnerable to their hatred  
fists      perverse desires      diseases  
To use one's face and body literally

to pay the rent the pimp      utilities      nylons      lipstick,  
(Chrystos, 1988, p. 42).

This first part of the poem is real. It is so real because Chrystos knows the life of a sexworker. Her experience is one before the internet and the many changes in the trade. But for sexworkers who are not cis-gendered and who do not have the ‘perfect’ porn body, the streets are still a reality. And sexworkers who are in the trade for the sole purpose of financing their drug use, the streets are often their only option. Chrystos’ words might be outdated for many sexworkers who are entrepreneurs in charge of their job; who use the internet and iPhones; and who do not need to walk the streets; but her former reality now applies to women she did not write of: Trans women. Women whom I hope she is an ally to today.

“No More Metaphors” has been read by my eyes countless times. When I read the first chunk above I can see the video footage of men sexually attacking Trans women on the Chilean news. An attack does not always involve punches and kicks. The “hunger of strangers” Chrystos writes is present in the news video and my poem. “Vulnerable to their hatred” takes a new form of misogyny when reading “*No Nos Dejan Dormir*”. It is acceptable to be attracted to cis-gendered women in our society. It is the opposite when it comes to Trans women. The “hunger of men” seeking Trans women is taboo and much more hidden than those who seek services of cis-gendered sexworkers. The vulnerability heightens when a Trans sexworker walks the streets to look for clients. And the “hunger” often turns to rage and murder after its appetite has been filled. Chrystos writes:

To be a murderer of prostitutes  
is to be free

to do it  
as many times as you want,  
(Chrystos, 1988, p. 42).

Written for the “Green River victims”, sexworkers killed by Gary Ridgeway (now in prison) in Seattle throughout the 1980s and 90s, Chrystos’ poem applies today. As stated earlier, her words ring true. In this case, for the most part, her poem written for and about cis-gendered sexworkers now applies primarily to Trans women of colour in the sex trade. This is not to say cis-gendered sexworkers are not killed or attacked. But the tide of violence has shifted toward those not seen as real women, not seen as real people, and erased from society when murdered.

## **Alexie: Fancydancing with Words**

Diana Taylor argues that colonized people keep their memories alive through what she calls acts of transfer (Taylor, 2003, p. 50). She argues that where institutionalized forms of knowledge in the forms of writing and archives have excluded colonized groups, embodied acts enable the passing on of what she calls scenarios of memory. She calls these embodied enactments the repertoire. Spokane/Couer D'Alene poet, short story writer, memoirist and novelist Sherman Alexie, alongside Chrystos, is an example of a poet, who, like Chrystos, works to create an imaginative map of Indigenous worlds by restoring what has been cast aside. His work draws on the performed traditions of Indigenous people to do this. His work is thus both scribal and performative. His poems draw on acts of transfer while also rendering it in writing – creating a mixture of scribal and repertoire – making the scribal and vice versa. I was introduced to prose style poems via his first collection “The Business of Fancy dancing” published by Hanging Loose Press in 1992. Alexie is the first poet I devoured. Every book became a must to have. “We know you love Sherman Alexie!” said employees at the now defunct Toronto Women’s Bookstore where I bought every Alexie book I own. I awaited every order to come in with the same anticipation and eagerness that a child has when waiting for their birthday to come so they can attack their gifts. My eyes devoured every page.

I have re-read six prose poems and a short-story countless times in Alexie’s first collection. Every time I read the short story “Translated From The American” I see something new, or revisit an old revelation. Alexie and his family are on their way to a pow wow. His infant son is held by his grandmother. Alexie and her argue over blood,

language, culture, and tradition. She refuses to call her grandson by his “white name” and from that their conversation touches on colonialism and all its ills, (Alexie, 1992, p. 20). The story ends with a guard at the Pow Wow gates asking if they have any liquor in the van as it’s a dry Pow Wow. “All we have is us,” says Alexie, (Alexie, 1992, p. 21). A page and a half, the story is a quick read, and not. It is layered. There is much in the story to ponder. Reading it close to two-hundred times, I am not tired of it.

The same goes for the six prose poems I re-read in the collection, one being “Dead Letter Office”, a ten-line paragraph made up of two sentences:

I get a letter, written in my native tongue, but I don't understand it, so I spend the night looking for a translator, until I find Big Mom in the bar. She speaks the language, but I have to fancydance for her, in blue parka and tennis shoes, circling the jukebox, while all the other Skins fall back to the floor, from whiskey and fear and sex and dreams, calling me a name I recognize but cannot be sure is my own, until closing time, when Big Mom rises from her chair, walks out the door, and I follow her for years, holding some brief letter from the past, finding she had never been here, she had never gone,  
(Alexie, 1992, p. 36).

“I get a letter...” is how Alexie starts the poem. He writes of communication while communicating to the reader in a three-part process: the story, the letter, the poem. All in four words. Brilliant. Layered. Complex. And yet, it’s a common start to a story: “I get a...”. Alexie uses familiarity and simplicity to engage the reader before bringing the layers of his reality, Indigenous realities, through prose poetry.

The first line of “Dead Letter Office” continues with, “...written in my native tongue, but I don’t understand it, so I spend the night searching for a translator, until I find Big Mom in the bar.” Alexie introduces us to the legacy of colonialism, its tools and after effects: the taking away of language and the introduction of alcohol – all so as to

steal land and resources and create a colonial state. The reader is also introduced to the ways Indigenous culture maintains itself through transformation in the context of dispossession. Here the speaker seeks an Elder, someone who knows the language, a keeper of Indigenous traditions and ways of life. The young seek advice from the old, and Alexie searches for Big Mom as one day someone will search for him. The reader is engaged as the story, the journey, begins.

He writes, “She speaks the language, but I have to fancydance for her...” (Alexie, 1992, p.36). For thousands of years Indigenous peoples traded within their own tribes and with other tribes. Today, trade happens in similar ways as well as different forms. In “Dead Letter Office” Alexie shows two main components of Indigenous culture traded for one another: language and dance. It’s an important interaction between youth and Elder. It is the maintenance of culture via trade, language, and dance. Again, the triality suggested in the opening lines, is now used here. Culture, language, and trade intersect and feed off each other. And in this small interaction the reader witnesses the survival of a people through action, repetition, and tradition. When reading the poem, if the reader keeps the title of the book in mind, “The Business of Fancydancing”, although “Dead Letter Office” is not the feature poem of the book bearing the same name as the book’s title, the reader will see the connection between the title and the exchange between Alexie and Big Mom. In our colonial capitalist world where money is the drive for everything Big Mom requests a dance as opposed to Alexie buying her a beer in the bar where they meet. We see a traditional and embodied cultural exchange versus the commodity based relations of capitalism. In this poem, performative traditions wins. Although Alexie cannot speak his language he can dance. He has something to offer in

exchange for translation; he brings something to the table. Is Alexie challenging capitalism? Is his use of “business” done for those who don’t understand or know about Indigenous traditions? In the titled poem of the collection Alexie writes, “Money is a tool, putty to fill our empty spaces, a ladder so we can reach for more”, (Alexie, 1992, p. 69). But Big Mom has the language, the key to culture, and all she wants is a dance.

A large part of Indigenous traditions is storytelling. When we reach the poem’s end, Big Mom is described as leaving the bar followed by Alexie. A key line shows the reader this is all a dream, a story, a fiction to teach people: “...I follow her for years, holding some brief letter from the past, finding she had never been here, she had never gone.” Was Big Mom a trickster? Was she in Alexie’s story as a teaching tool?

There is a liminality to Big Mom, she is caught in spaces of dreamtime while not being anywhere at all, possibly a figment of Alexie’s imagination, or in some form a constant presence in Alexie’s life. At the sweatlodge I was taught that dreams teach you things, they are also warnings, and at times communication with those who have passed on to Spirit World. Alexie is in transition from past, present, and future in the poem. As he shows us what is happening in the story he is also watching and participating. Arthur Koestler in his book “The Act of Creation” proposes that creativity depends on bringing together ideas and practices which are not conventionally associated. It is akin to dreaming. It is an act of cutting and mixing the incompatible. It is a way of bringing things together which are never normally thought of as related. “Dreaming is distinguished from other delusionary states by being transitory,” (Koestler, 1964, p. 180). Koetsler describes dreaming as being the spectator and producer of images, “...he is the cinema operator who works the projection machine, and the

audience at the same time,” (1964, p. 180). This is the genius of Alexie; while writing he is also sitting beside us watching the action as we read his words. And as he is watching the action, he is the action. To add on to Koestler, there is a triality to Alexie’s writing here as he is a participant as well as a producer and spectator who is transitioning from role to role as well as experiencing them simultaneously. Is Alexie being delusional or are we experiencing delusion? This is sometimes part of the ride of reading and writing poems. And sometimes it’s worth sitting and enjoying the ride and nothing more.

Big Mom is an example of Victor Turner’s description of liminality as being “neither here nor there”. And Big Mom simultaneously fits Turner’s definition of being “betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, conventions, custom, and ceremonial”, (Turner, 1969, p. 95). Big Mom is in a bar which is seen as the place and representation of the cause of the destruction of Indigenous culture by many Indigenous peoples—Elders, traditionalists, and historians—yet she practices her culture in this vilified setting. “Dead Letter Office” seems like a symbolic search of identity where colonial realities are expressed as are the survival of a people, Alexie’s tribe: the Spokane/Coeur D’Alene.

The brilliance of “Dead Letter Office” is not only the description of Indigenous culture, but also the use of it in the poem itself. Repetition as a form of survival, doing something over and over in new ways and in new places is enduring while creating in the midst of a threat of extermination. Through repetition, and repetition with a difference, indigenous culture lives—ceremony, dance, story sharing—is not only described in the poem, it happens in it. There is a circularity present in the poem which

poses an alternative to the linearity of European culture and living. This circularity is a way of thinking and being. Alexie opens the poem with receiving a letter he does not understand and takes us on his journey. Later, when on his quest, while dancing as a form of barter, he is called a name in his language by community members and does not understand it: "...calling me by a name I recognize but cannot be sure is my own...", (Alexie, 1992, p.36). The reader is taken back to the crux of the poem as Alexie dances in front of community members, he is practicing his culture while not knowing and understanding the central piece of it: language.

Alexie's influence on my writing is present in poems included in my chapbook "*Kuzushi*" (2017). One example is "On The Mourners Bench". It is a poem about activist culture, practice, and tradition. About those who speak truth to power via different means, in this case it is the use of their bodies through showing up for protests, vigils, talks, and more. Dr. Martin Luther King and Dr. Robin Kelly are the Elders in the poem, the latter more present than the former. Leftists sitting in church pews seek to learn from Dr. Kelly similar to Alexie seeking out Big Mom for translation. Story is shared in the exchange for time and presence; not money; not dance. Extensions and results of colonialism are named—war, violence against women, murder of leaders—whereas Alexie describes such extensions in his poem—loss of language and alcoholism. Alexie's descriptions are minimalist, one line—"I have to fancydance for her"—where my description of activist culture takes you on sight where you see the people, what they are wearing, how they act, what they do. Although there is room for detail, poetry is often about being concise. At some points, I use minimalist writing like Alexie, at others I

use description. What is also present in Alexie's influence is the circular way of writing. My poem starts with Dr. Kelly's joke, and the reader is brought back to it at the end similar to Alexie writing of language at his poem's start and finish. Monette's influence is also present; "The Worrying" is about death, the coming of death, and the witnessing of death. "Mourners..." is about remembering the dead, honouring their lives, and having them continue via different forms of remembrance.

## PART II: POETIC PRACTICE

### Laying Down Ink

I'm a poet to be read more than heard. I'm not a spoken word poet. I'm a book poet. Do some of my poems have a spoken word tone? Yes. Primarily I write with the intention of being published and read. But when preparing work for an audience of non-poets, people who primarily read novels, if anything, I use rhyme and stanzas to make my message easier to digest. This is not to say my poems do not challenge my audience's way of thinking. When writing or performing political poems I want to shift the reader or listener off centre, and I aim to discomfort but not to bring pain or re-traumatize my listener. When performing "I Am Prepared To Live" at my talk "What's Wrong With Your Leg?" in November 2016 (one-third of my FES Masters portfolio), I let my audience know I would be talking about ableism, racism, and rape culture. In the activist community, this is called a "trigger warning" or "content warning".

So far, I have argued and described how I became interested in writing, and I have discussed some of the poets who have shaped my craft and my political outlook. Here I turn to the question of process: the nuts and bolts of writing. You often hear poets say, "We write because we have to." One has to eat, sleep, and relieve themselves; does one have to write? In terms of poetry, the belief and reality is, "Poets make no money." Why do poets write? Is it enough to say or believe "because we have to"? If there is no economic incentive to write poems, why is the poem valued? And if there is no value to a poem, why are poems often quoted and cited by peoples in positions of power trying to make a point? If the poet is wasting their time and not

adding to society why are they often the first killed in revolutions or asked to read at events and important ceremonies.

The process of writing in my life is based on discipline: laying down words, letter by letter, line by line, on page after page. This is not exclusive to fingers dancing on a qwerty keyboard. There is a beauty and realness to writing by hand, seeing a pen glide across a page while leaving its mark. In terms of writing, the connection from mind to heart to hand to pen to page is matched by no other. Looking at a screen is immediate, visceral, and in some strange way, unreal. The workings behind a screen and the magic of letters appearing or disappearing at one's wish seems to be a form of non-commitment. When writing by hand, flesh on paper, mind made, words laid, no turning back, is a throwback to times that are disappearing. Our non-committal society where words can be erased, just as peoples and lives, has writing be a form of artificial existence. Not that words on paper are not later changed in the editing process, but the honesty of a first draft with no real compromise is intact.

Much of my poems are written by hand first. I use 8x11 note pads and a blue pen to write my first draft. Often, I keep going without editing. To edit is to halt the process. To halt is to stall. To stall is to procrastinate. And a body in motion stays in motion; a hand continually writing stays writing. At times, when needed, I open and close my fingers, twist my waist to stretch my back, move my shoulders in forward and backward circles, lift my head up and down and move it side to side; but all this has to be earned by laying down ink on paper, or words on a screen.

There are colloquial terms I use that apply to writing. "You got to put one foot in front of the other," is one I've changed to "putting word after word", and "line after line",

and “letter by letter the stage is set.” There is no other way.

Poet Donald Revel writes, “...because I write on a manual typewriter, I am in physical contact with the page. I’m ever reminded that a poem is first a piece of white paper and only later (to paraphrase Robert Rauschenberg) a piece of paper more or less covered with words. In the interval, letters and words have taken the places into which I’ve put them, and those places are not mine. It’s my poem all right, but it doesn’t look like me. Putting poems on pages, I put the words exactly where they are. I cannot disavow them, but they are already gone from me”, (Revel, 2004, p.7).

To be a writer one must be prepared to re-write. Sto:lo feminist writer Lee Maracle, one of my mentors, taught me “Writing is about re-writing,” (Personal Conversation, 2006). To be a writer one has to be a reader. And I believe a writer has to be a re-reader as much as a re-writer. Acclaimed poet Derek Walcott has his work on display in the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library at the University of Toronto. There are hand written letters, scraps of paper, typed poems and essays, much of his process archived for the public to see. Walcott wrote long before the typewriter turned computer processor turned PC turned to the laptop which is what most writers use today. And the many poets before him wrote on paper, prior to that, tree bark, prior, animal skins, prior to that, rocks and caves, prior, via memory and possibly spoken out into the ether. In her introduction to “My Father Was A Toltec and Selected Poems” (2004), Chicana poet and visual artist Ana Castillo writes of using small notebooks intended to collect data and record quotas that her Mother would get at her factory job. Castillo’s first poems were written in these pads filled with coarse paper. But not having pads to write in did not stop Castillo. Like a true artist, Castillo wrote and drew anywhere and on anything,

she lists "...the blank side of business mail envelopes and working around the animal blood on butcher paper...", (Castillo, 2004, xxi).

Today, I live in a small room filled with piles of books, "The New Yorker" magazines, loose papers, old essays from undergrad, newspapers from my days as Editor-in-Chief of "The Window" of University of Toronto and writing for "XTRA!" and "Anishinabek News", two desks covered in what is written above, and a bed. This after doing several purges. Is this strange? Do I feel strange? Fear of becoming a hoarder has haunted me. The solution proposed to me is to get an e-reader. That would take away from the ceremony of reading; holding a book in hand; holding what people have been holding for hundreds of years; and hoping that people will hold my words in the same form in future. I was comforted when reading Kenyan writer Binyavanga Wainaina describe the same living conditions prior to him achieving acclaim for his monumental essay "How To Write About Africa" published in "Granta" magazine (2006), and his excellent memoir "One Day I Will Write About This Place" (2011). Ana Castillo writes of similar living conditions in her intro to "My Father Was A Toltec":

At twenty-four, finding myself in retreat in my unheated little basement flat, with not more than books and a big dog, and all my reflections and assessments about the state of Latinas born in the United States (particularly my own), I turned a sharp focus on writing and women's literature," (Castillo, 2004, p. xxv).

## Every Line A Grenade Pin

In a poetry workshop at an Indigenous writers gathering (2012) I heard a quote that stuck with me: “Every line a grenade pin.” The speaker, Ryan Red Corn, a member of the 1491s, a comedy troupe, shared the quote as something he keeps in mind when writing poetry. “The Worrying” by Paul Monette is an example of this. With every line, you are on the edge, Monette keeps you on your toes, there is life in the poem, and you are completely committed to finish reading it. When sharing “The Worrying” with a friend, he responded, “That’s heavy!” And I said, “There’s no way you’re not finishing the poem.” He agreed.

A good poem challenges you, has you engaged the entire time your eyes are on the page, fills you with emotion, takes you on a ride and sees you disappointed when it is over. A good poem will see you re-read the poem, either immediately or at some point in the near future. Writing this essay has been a pleasure because I had to re-read several of my favourite poems, think about them, read them aloud, journal about them, talk about them with people, and explore them in this essay.

“Every line a grenade pin” is about engagement, the reader thinking about what is coming next, and a sense of urgency. The urgency in “The Worrying” is present in my poems “Suspended In Time: Myrtle Beach 2003” and “*Llorar y Llorar*” which are a part of “*Kuzushi*” (2017). For those two poems, I am influenced by Sherman Alexie, Jimmy Santiago Bacca, Ana Castillo, Chrystos, and Paul Monette—all the poets I write of above. You can see them all in these two poems: the prose, politics, preciseness, language, and rhythm. “Every line a grenade pin” not only refers to an awaiting explosion, it refers to being succinct which is what helps keep the reader on edge.

Succinctness is the gift and strength of a poet, which is why novelists are jealous of poets. A poet gets to the point. A poet enters your life announced and leaves without a trace; all that is left is their words and your memory of the interaction and experience.

Derek Walcott, in his poem “The Forest of Europe” about colonialism, isolation, and removal, writes what I believe is the perfect definition of what a great poem is:

From hand to mouth, across the centuries,  
the bread that lasts when systems have decayed,  
when, in his forest of barbed-wire branches,  
a prisoner circles, chewing the one phrase,  
whose music will last longer than the leaves...  
(Walcott, 1993, p. 87)

A great poem is the bread that lasts. Great poems stay with you. Great poems are read many times, and shared with others, and stay with those you’ve shared with, and are passed on and on, and never go stale.

“*Kuzushi*” (2017) is influenced by Alexie, Bacca, Castillo, Chrystos, and Monette; it is about being on the margins and challenging the oppression I see coming from the centre. It’s about observing and not staying quiet. Reflection, yes. Silence, no. It’s about honouring and remembering. It’s about being on the outside and not wanting to be the centre. In my experiences with activism I have noticed people do not want to talk about the controversial realities that exist within my city and between different communities fighting for change. It’s easy to challenge white supremacy, whiteness, and white people. But how do we talk and write about the struggles between those fighting white supremacist ableist rapist capitalist homo and transphobic patriarchy? About groups who are not white? How do we challenge privileges among peoples who are challenging colonialism? And where and when is the right place?

Like Bacca I am an activist who views my writing as activism, I write about such difficult realities in my journal, in my poems, and I engage in these sensitive conversations with people who I know will listen, contribute, and not turn our talk into a drama infused battle. Our avoidance of such conversations is holding our activist communities back. And those who are leading the discussions who do not recognize their own privileges whether they be of ability, skin, sexuality, gender, and class, are adding to the dilemma; holding back possible change, or furthering the change that is slowly happening.

Living liminally, I write of the liminal state, and I pay tribute to it and those who live there with me. Liminality is not a place of shame although society teaches us that. My poem “Dear Mr. Prime Minister” is exactly this. Everyone in the poem is speaking from their place on the margins and challenging the face of power. Everyone is a real person. Each of their stories matter. There are different forms of violence present: colonialism, racism, ableism, transphobia, misogyny, and rape culture. “*Kuzushi*” is an example of “Arts of the contact zone”, a concept coined by Mary Louise Pratt (1999). The contact zone is a space where cultures and systems of power meet and wrestle with each other. Pratt writes of “safe houses”, what some of us call safer spaces, where ideas can be discussed with “temporary protection from legacies of oppression, (Pratt, 1999, p. 6). “*Kuzushi*” is such a place. The themes are difficult, raw, and are cause for revolution.

“*Kuzushi*” (my chapbook) is the opposite of “The American Dream”, upward mobility, and the desire to break out. We are who we are. We are where we are. We are here. These poems are us. This is why I end the collection with “I Am Prepared To

Live". Although death is a running theme throughout the chapbook, I am living among it all. And life to me is reading and writing. Years reading the words of others, and laying my words on paper, published in journals, magazines, and newspapers, this collection of poems is my first. It is life with spurts of death on the page; the coveted page which always accepts me, invites me, lays there for me to share in love, anger, confusion, and wonder. Every line a grenade pin with the hopes of it being the bread that lasts.

Sadly, poetry is often overlooked by readers, reviewers, publishers, and writers. To be a poet is to be the red headed stepchild of the literature world. Less and less publishers accept manuscripts and put forth collections of poems; bookstores have smaller and smaller poetry sections year after year; readers gravitate toward novels and recently, memoirs. The poem and the poet are placed on the shelf so the 'real literature' and the 'real writers' can take centre stage. In her essay "Losing It", Black feminist writer Roxanne Gay challenges these notions of grandeur: "I will never understand why more people don't appreciate poetry. Even when I am confounded by a poem, my world is changed in some way. Poetry makes me think more carefully about the lyricism and the language I use in my prose. It helps give shape to my writing, helps me bring the reader to the heart of what I want to say. Poetry gives me the strength of conviction to take chances in my writing, to allow myself to be vulnerable," (Gay, Poetry Magazine, January 2017).

A poem is work resulting from reading other poets who come before you; to you having the courage to come the page; to laying down ink, watching it dry, letting it dry, reading what you've written, finding your voice, exercising your thoughts, agonizing on

the ever-elusive perfect line; to moving away from the page to refresh your mind, coming back to the page to re-read and re-write and leaving once you are content. And as Charles Bukowski asked, or stated rather, in one of his monumental poems, “A poem is...” (1962). A poem is many things and represents and touches many people. Poetry matters because of this.

In “Losing It”, Roxanne Gay describes her reading of poetry as, “What I do know is that when I read poetry, good poetry, I forget to breathe and my body is suffused with something unnamable—a combination of awe and astonishment and the purest of pleasures. Reading poetry is such a thrill that I often feel like I’m getting away with something,” (Gay, Poetry Magazine, January 2017). This is also partly why I write. It is said that to read a good book is to spend time with a close friend. Such is the true connection of words to reader.

A poem is creation, molding thoughts, ideas, and beliefs together that are re-worked, manipulated, sifted, and laid out to dry. A poem is sacred as its foundation is truth. A poem is an extension of oneself, an invitation to see what the poet sees, and a connecting of minds, hearts, and souls. A poem does not have to be long. A poem does not have to be un-accessible. A poem is, for me, activism, speaking truth to power, speaking from a place of oppression, and standing with and behind others who are oppressed, writing from the self, for the self, and for others.

Oppression has not taken me, and we can fight. We do fight. We are fighting. I am an activist whose writing is his activism. I fight on paper. Mexican journalist Javier Vasquez Cardenas was murdered for fighting oppression on paper. He was not silent. I

am not silent. Silence is death. I am prepared to live. This essay is of my process of living through poetry.

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**Disrupting**

**Disablement:**

**History**

**Exclusion**

**Desire**

**&**

**Change**

## **Disrupting Disablement: History, Exclusion, Desire and Change**

*This essay is written in support of a talk and performance I gave to the Generous Space Toronto TBLGQ Christian Community on November 23, 2017 called “What’s Wrong With Your Leg?": Ableism, Genesis, and Community”. I dedicated it to my Mother, Julia Rosa Vallejos; and to Indigenous writers Marilyn Dumont, Simon Ortiz, Lee Maracle, and Daniel Heath Justice, without who’s support I would not have got where I am as an academic, poet and essayist.*

### **Everyday Ableism, Racism, and Rape Culture**

The subway rumbles as we ride north toward Finch station. People are wearing unhappy faces for several reasons: the unpredictable weather has many overdressed and feeling like the train is a moving sauna; the workday is over but the relief from being home is still ways away; and the cramming of bodies leads to one wish: that there were more trains and less people in Toronto.

When riding the TTC I often wonder how I’m perceived when sitting on the blue seats designated for the elderly, pregnant women, and peoples with disabilities. I am the latter. In time, I will fit two of the groups the blue seats are made for. But for now, as a young man of colour living with an invisible disability I often feel that I am being judged, or will be accosted by passengers or TTC cops, for sitting in a seat I have a right to sit in.

Getting a seat is more than half the battle. At that point, I can ignore someone if they are challenging me on why I am sitting in a section they deem not made for me. The real problem I face is when the blue seats are taken by people who are able-bodied and just want to rest. The conversation I imagine is one that sees me having to argue when I should not have to. And of course, being told the seat is not for me so why am I causing a problem. Having brown skin, long black hair, and a beard sees me face

different forms of racism that add to, and intersect with, the ableism I face. And how can I prove that the blue seats made for peoples with a disability, of which I am one, are for me and the like when I show no visible signs?

I first learned about this years ago when asking a flight attendant if I could board the plane early so as to avoid the hustle and bustle of eager travelers. I explained that I had a bad leg and weak bones. After declining my request, she looked at her co-worker standing beside her and said, "Some people will do anything to get on a plane first."

"Some people" might be anyone or everyone. But with my experience of being treated differently for having brown skin which darkens in warmer seasons; the length of my hair which has people assume I am First Nations in an anti-Indigenous society; and the beard I have which has some people assume I am Muslim in an Islamophobic society; "some people" to me means Indigenous peoples and peoples of colour, two classifications that often intersect but not always. Not all Indigenous peoples are of colour, and not all people of colour are Indigenous. I am also mixed race and so I belong to several groups because of this: Indigenous, Latino, East and West Asian. Racist white people love to say, "You're a mutt!"

I'm human, mixed race, of colour, and live with an invisible disability.

Being a person of colour with mixed Indigenous roots in a white supremacist society founded on colonialism is not easy. As I will argue in this essay, the underlying systems of power that produce my experience are many. Their everyday manifestations result in a sense of hypervisibility, a sense that you are at the other end of a hostile gaze. This realization requires constant negotiation of everyday obstacles as well as a continued

awareness of the meaning of one's shifting identity. It can be very risky to fail to have this awareness; or to be unwilling to undertake this negotiation in a society where to be disabled and not white is a life filled with risk.

I want to begin with an anecdote that illustrates what I mean. Last week as I got on the subway at Lawrence and headed north toward Finch station. I had a jacket under one arm, a bag of groceries under the other, and my book bag hanging off one shoulder with the strap resting across my back and chest. There are buttons on my bag and its strap that challenge colonialism, racism, homo and transphobia, rape culture, and ableism, and some celebrating book culture.

The train moved forward as bodies rocked and shifted. Depending on the day and its weather I can feel pain in my neck, back, hips, knees, and ankles. On such days, damp and rainy days to be specific, keeping my balance on a moving train that is packed is not easy. Being average height with a husky body and carrying no aids for walking, asking someone for a blue seat intended for me is also not easy. Much of my activism is my writing or poems and essays because sometimes I just feel like pushing through pain and oppression and avoiding conflict. So, last week I decided to stand and sway with those around me on the train.

Riding the subway at peak hours takes strategic planning. I do not live near Lawrence station. But Finch station, my pickup point that evening, has no library where I can do schoolwork. Lawrence station is conveniently located across the street from a Toronto Public Library and a Starbucks coffee shop. Being a student on a tight budget I know that Starbucks gives hot water for free so I go there with my own tea bags and do

work there or move to another location. And Lawrence station is only four stops away from Finch. I can stand for four stops if I need to. So, I head to Lawrence station in the early afternoon and do work at Starbucks and later move to the Toronto Public Library across the street. Thirty minutes before my ride arrives at Finch I get on the subway.

As I stood near the blue seats to my right that had people reading the daily “Metro” I made sure my feet were shoulder width apart and my knees were slightly bent so as to maximize my balance. Professionals young and old, of colour and white, stood around me. Dress pants and shoes accompanied button up shirts and hair done for work. The occasional whiff of perfume and cologne brushed my nose. And the hum and screech of the train was constant.

A young white woman stood in front of me. I have this caution about white women especially at night but also during the day. It’s a vicious circle of them being afraid of me because of how I look, and me fearing them playing on that fear seeing me get in trouble with the law for just being me: a man of colour. As a straight cis-gendered male who is larger than most women I acknowledge and check my privilege. But it’s only white women who this conundrum of white privilege and racist ideologies versus male privilege play out. If I’m on a street alone and there is a woman near me I cross the street, or wait for them to pass allowing distance to form between us, so they feel safe. When it’s a white woman I do it for the same reason but also so I feel safe.

The white woman on the train stared at me as I looked past her and saw our reflection in the window behind her. As we stood on the moving train a flicker of light caught my attention. I looked down and saw a large rock on her finger. In the same time the flash of her ring came before my eyes and went, my eyes looked down at her shiny

stone, and then the panic started. She looked at me, then away, while placing her right hand over her left for the duration of the ride.

I can't cross the street on a packed train. And I can't wait for this white woman to pass me because we are not moving, the train is. While all this is happening, I'm doing my best to maintain my balance. Creator forbid that I get bumped into, or fall on, her. What do I do? I awkwardly look to my right, away from her, even though we are half a foot in front of one another. When the train stops at Finch station I wait for her and the rest of the herd to get off, and then wait more for the line to go upstairs via the stairs and escalator to shorten or disappear. I also wait so this white woman does not feel like I'm following her.

When starting this Master's program, I was given a piece of advice from an academic of colour which was to record everything in a journal that relates to my journey in this program. I have written much, but if I was to list all the daily incidents of ableism, racism, and rape culture that I see and experience, my head would be buried in a journal half the day. Rather than constantly journal, I write poems to compliment my personal recordings; below is a poem written about the experience above:

*When writing "The Girl On The Train"  
Did Paula Hawkins know  
She'd be read  
By white women sitting in every row?  
Her book in pale hands  
Becomes flesh as we stand  
Our bodies moving fast, yet slow.  
Colour always a losing race  
Looking away when her ring starts to glow  
Runs shock in my nerves  
Seeing a twitch in my spine and the squinting of my face.  
It's not only I who's blinded as her right hand covers the left  
Is my Brown body always a threat?  
Brittle bones, aching joints, another white girl on a train scared to death.*

## Understanding Everyday Ableism and Racism

I told my stories to offer an opportunity for my spiritual community (November 2016) to know something key about me after two years of knowing them: my *living with a disability*—Osteo-genesis Imperfecta (OI) also known as brittle bones disease. But this essay is also the story of what it means to be a racialized man living with a disability which is an experience shared by many. This is therefore a personal “coming out” but it is also about something bigger than me. It attempts to explain what is not obvious. That is, I attempt to unmask and analyze the ways in which social forces produce the lived experiences we take for granted and think of as normal, determine our identity—that is who we think we are and what we think we are able to do—our power, and possibility. Some scholars call this process autoethnography, as it is a self-reflective process that traces the ways in which the social and political forces are experienced in the everyday. It relies on a description of the social in the everyday as a way of understanding the ways in which power determines both what we are able to experience, to know, and to feel. Once you can analyze the underlying causes of your experiences, you are able to challenge their root causes. In my case such challenges rely on critical writing.

## **Difference and Identity**

In their academic article “Identity as Adaptation to Social, Cultural, and Historical Context” Psychologists Baumeister and Muraven (1996) base one’s identity “as a composite definition of” one’s self, (p. 405). To them, the self is rooted in one’s body, consciousness, connection with and to groups, and making decisions and self-regulating; and they define identity as “a set of meaningful definitions that are ascribed or attached to the self, including social roles, reputation, a structure of values and priorities, and a conception of one’s potentiality,” (Baumeister, 1996, p. 406). Their use and writing of “adaptation” is their belief that “individual identity is an adaptation to a social context,” (Baumeister, 1996, p. 405). The change of human existence from rural community living to urban individuality has seen humans turn from thinking of a group they belonged to, to themselves. Where historically a person’s identity was restricted to relations of birth, family, gender, and background, today “individuals actively choose, alter, and modify their identities based on what will enable them to get along best,” (Baumeister, 1996, p. 405). Erica Townsend-Bell (2007) writes in her article “Identities Matter”: “Identity can only exist in relation to an opposite or an Other,” (p. 29). Like Townsend Bell, in his monumental essay “Cultural Identity and Diaspora”, Stuart Hall (1990) complicates these ideas. For him, identity is less an issue of choice. He writes of two ways of thinking about cultural identity: one, the shared collective true self which is stable and unchanging and boasts of being one people; two, identity as based on points of difference—who we are and who we have become, (Hall, 1990, p, 225). Difference according to Stuart Hall is produced by social divisions and social antagonisms which lead to a variety of different subject positions—identities, (Hall, 1996, p. 600). Hall

argues that difference is central to making sense of being. We come to knowledge through being able to differentiate one thing from another. The problem arises where power is aligned to difference and differentiation also implies inequality and hierarchy. Hierarchies of difference have been a part of, and is the basis of, my identity, as is the process of identifying.

I always knew I was different. Difference started with seeing that all the other kids in school had two parents. I had one: my Mother. Difference also came in the form of language; my Mother and I speak *Castellano*, a dialect of Spanish, where everyone else in school spoke English. Difference came in the form of colour; me being non-white but also not Black while befriending four Black boys who were my first crew, my first set of friends. Difference came with being mixed race which meant never fully being a part of any community. Difference came later with disability. “Later” as in the ability to distinguish my body being different than other children’s bodies when experiencing my first fracture that I was conscious of; this happened in grade three. I had broken bones prior to this incident in the schoolyard but my mind was not able to process why. While playing red-rover, a classmate crashed through my linked arms and broke my right forearm. Two weeks later I broke my left femur while running in a park and found myself in the hospital for three months. Healing was a process of operations, being laid up in traction, a cast on my left leg and one on my right arm, to a banana cart (a hybrid of a bed and a wheelchair), to a walker to crutches to cane to the limp I have today. I went through this process three times in my life: ages 9, 13, and 16. These processes brought my consciousness of difference as a person living with a disability. These processes saw me labeled and identifying in different ways over the span of my life:

crippled, handicapped, differently abled, disabled. Today, thirty-two broken bones later, I define my difference as living with a disability. Difference in terms of living with Osteogenesis Imperfecta aka brittle bones disease is not only my experience. Difference is embodied in my skin, my limp, several scars, and warped limbs that have limited mobility.

The years described above—9 to 16—saw much growth and transition in terms of the language of disability and how peoples living with disabilities identify and see themselves. And the growth and struggle has continued. In the 1980s, there was a push back to being labelled “crippled” which led to the term “handicapped”. In the 1990s, the language moved to “differently-abled” to “disabled” in the early 2000s. This process took years. And it’s not done. I now say, “I live with a disability” usually as a counter to people who label me as “suffering” with a disability, or still use the term handicapped, or try to oppress me via the word cripple. This process of shifting identity is described well by Stuart Hall (1990) who writes, “...we should think of identity as a ‘production’ which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted with, not outside, representation,” (p. 223).

As I grow and evolve as a person this process of identity production is a constant. Now reading Stuart Hall as part of my education is an example of this. I’m what I call “a high school kick-out” (not “drop out”, as I was kicked out of every high school I attended), who later turned university graduate. Now I’m a Master’s student. And there has been much more to my production of identity than the status of being a student: activist, event organizer, poet, journalist, columnist, editor, judoka... And within these identities there are different categories that come with growth. For example, I was

a poet before being published; now I am a published poet after seeing my words in print. After being published, I taught poetry seminars which added to me being labelled a teacher of poetry. I do not have a book published yet but when I do that will add to the process and production of my identity as a poet.

In terms of the culture of disability identity, is there a shared collective? Even within the political identity implied by the term “disability”, there are hierarchies of difference. My weak bones are not equal to someone living with Cerebral Palsy. When discussing the overcrowded subway system in Tokyo, Japan where transit employees are hired to push and pack people in subway cars like sardines, an acquaintance who lives with Cerebral Palsy pointed out how such an experience would be much more dangerous for me than him. He was correct. I could have a bone, or bones, broken in the chaos of such a ride. But, I could avoid using transit and walk where I needed to go which is not an option for him as a person with limited energy and mobility. We are both men who live with disabilities and have been placed under the umbrella of cultural disability identity but our lives and experiences—disability and much more—are very different. AJ Withers (2012) describes this when writing, “Disabled people are not a homogenous group; we are diverse and impacted by different oppressions,” (p.11). Point number two on difference by Hall is one that fits more, and is realistic as opposed to the idealized myth of a monolithic culture of disability. Hall (1990) adds to this when writing, “...identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past,” (p. 225). As opposed to my acquaintance and I accepting the label of “cripple” we identify as peoples who live with disabilities, and we name our disability so as to maintain our sense of selves and to

recognize our different abilities within our disabilities. As peoples and movements who fight for rights of peoples living with disabilities, language is a key to change. There is a “...continuous ‘play’ of history, culture, and power” (Hall, 1990, p. 224) that is evident in the name change of the place I spent nine months of my life in three chunks listed above—9, 13, and 16. What was called the Ontario Crippled Children’s Centre became Hugh Macmillan Rehab Centre and is today the Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital.

Early in my schooling, I was labelled as cripple after breaking my leg. I was left with a limp which further Othered me in a school that had a majority of white teachers and in which whiteness was normative. Not being as mobile as other kids I watched a lot of TV seeing shows with mainly white actors, and reading books by white authors who wrote white characters. I knew I was different; school and media confirmed this. I remember watching the television show “The Beachcombers” as a young child and always wanting the Indigenous actor Pat John who played Jesse Jim to show up on screen. John was the only actor on Canadian television who looked similar to my family and I; I saw the closest thing to myself on screen which brought familiarity and a sense of existence on white dominated Canadian television.

Remembering this pervasive whiteness brings to mind Stuart Hall’s (1996) description of “...a nation is not only a political entity but something which produces meanings—a system of cultural representation,” (p. 612). White culture has dominated, and continues to dominate the Canadian landscape. My thirty-year-old example of “The Beachcombers” where one Brown person was a supporting actor in the show is still in place. Today, the CBC show “Working Moms” (2017) is centered around three white

women. What about women of colour like my Mother, now retired, who worked and raised me on her own for thirty-five years? And there are countless women of colour from different ethnicities doing the same today. We have been and continue to be taught that white is right and non-white peoples are always on the margin. This is how I identify: someone on the margins of society. It is more complex than race. It is ability, class, colour, and not having roots here on the land I live on.

When identifying themselves, many white people say to me, “I am sixth generation Canadian”. They have no care or concept of how Canada was built. Such an identity comes from what Hall (1996) writes, “...violent beginnings which stand at the origins of modern nations have first to be forgotten before allegiance to a more unified, homogenous national identity could begin to be forged,” (p. 616). I never learned the real history of what I call “the land now known as Canada” in grade school or high school; newspapers did not write of the atrocities that happened, or were happening, to Indigenous peoples when I was growing up. And I’ve never had a national identity. In my experience, when immigrants, or their children who are born here, use the word “Canadian” they mean white people of Anglo-Saxon descent. Or now that Canada is more diverse and boasts inclusivity, my Mom and the like say, “real Canadian” when they talk of white people. With white society dictating what Canada is, while always pushing us out, we’ve never adopted the identity of Canadian whether born here or not.

This past summer saw the celebration of colonialism via countrywide “Canada 150” events and television shows. The erasure Hall wrote of and that I experienced now turned to exposure so as to unify the Canada of today. “Canada 150” saw the opposite of the forgetting of Canada’s violent history, and promoted a reconciliation so as to grow

together as a nation of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples which in some ways goes back to Hall's writing of the shared collective. The sharing coming in the form of the new buzz word "reconciliation". But there is a whole lot of difference among both sides—Indigenous and non-Indigenous—which negates the promotion of two peoples making one nation. One way I identify is "I was born here but I'm not from here." White people hate this way I identify. My explanation is I am not Indigenous to this land. It is not my land. This decenters whiteness and makes uncomfortable the people who ask me: "Where are you from? What's your background?".

This past winter a white woman said to me, "When's the last time you went back home to Mexico?"

"I'm not Mexican," I said. "And I was born here."

"Oh, of course. I just have Mexico on my mind a lot these days," she said.

Using her white racist lens she imposed an identity on me that suited her view of who I am. We both attend an TBLGQ church that has Mexican refugees. Having brown skin, black hair and the name Jorge, she lumped me in with the Mexican refugee population of our church. I don't talk like someone new to Canada. I do not have a Mexican accent. And she has had conversations with me prior to her vocal racist assumption. Already at the margins via ability, colour, and class, she pushed me out more by enforcing her citizenship status on me, who she viewed and labelled as a non-citizen.

## **The Politics of Knowledge, Disability and Identity**

Up until recently, most people living with disabilities were written off, viewed as disposable, and imprisoned in hospitals, nursing homes, rehab centres, and/or their family's basement for life; disability activists refer to peoples facing such injustices as "stolen lives" who are "held hostage" and "warehoused", (Taylor, 2004). Already at the margins, peoples living with disabilities are not only forgotten about by the majority of society and their ableist lens, activists fighting against oppressions such as racism, homophobia, violence against women, and poverty also forget those living with disabilities. In 2003, disability activists marched for two weeks, crossing 144 miles from Philadelphia to Washington, D.C. Participant Sunny Taylor writes, "...we were barely mentioned by national news and virtually ignored by the left-wing media," (Taylor, 2004). As someone who has participated in various forms of activism in Toronto since 2003, I can attest to Taylor's words which are a direct challenge to able-bodied activists: "Unlike sexism and racism, which are perceived to be significant social problems, disability falls under the social radar and [ableism] is not recognized as a damaging or even particularly serious form of prejudice," (Taylor, 2004). It is not only invisibility that disability activists contend with, often it is outright exclusion: "Disability has not made it into the canon of identity politics and as a result is frequently excluded from progressive struggles. We have been ignored and in fact shunned by women's movements...racial movements, gay and lesbian activists, and to a larger degree, even workers' unions..." (Taylor, 2004). Peoples living with disabilities are at the margins of the margin.

As a person living with a disability who is mixed race, Indigenous, of colour, and from a working-class immigrant family, I have added to the invisibility of a group I am a

part of. The focus of my activism for the past fourteen years has been race related. Whether challenging racism, colonialism, violence against Indigenous women and women of colour, I have always focused on race with some allyship to queer and trans peoples and sexworkers. Now, is everyone in the above groups and struggles able-bodied or living without disability? Of course not. But I've not explicitly fought for, and with, the rights of peoples with living with a disability. Black feminist Sojourner Truth also did this: "Marginalized according to her race, gender, and ability, Truth found a home for her African-American female body by alienating her disabled body," (Minister, 2012). It is this Masters portfolio, primarily my talk and performance "'What's Wrong With Your Leg?': Ableism, Community, and Genesis" (performed November 23, 2016), and this essay in support of the talk, where I am confronting ableism—my own and that of society.

As I do my work, part of which is writing this essay, I socially locate myself, sharing my identity so my audience—whether reading this essay, or in person at my talk—knows who I am and who is speaking to them. Part of this is to show I am not an outsider looking in. This is important because of the horrific practices of social scientists and government agencies, past and present, who enter communities or movements, extract information, leave with no solutions, write and report only the negative, and are the sole benefactors of their oppressive research. To share my identity is also a teaching I learned from different Indigenous communities I have been a part of. At sweatlodge ceremonies on Cape Croker reserve and Saugeen First Nation I was taught to acknowledge and share who I am and where I come from. I am mixed race: *Mestizo*,

Basque, Chinese, and Arab. I was born on the stolen land now known as Canada. I come from my Mother who was born in Peru; she is me and I am her. I am a survivor of colonialism, racism, classism, and ableism. I live at the margins of my society.

When asked what I am studying in school I say, “I’m confronting environments that create and foster ableism, racism, and rape culture with poetry.” My talk “What’s Wrong With Your Leg?” and this accompanying essay are about my experience as a person living with a disability. Such academic inquiry is often dismissed, discarded, and seen as having no value in academia. University of Richmond Professor Eric Anthony Grollman and creator of the blog “Conditionally Accepted”, a play on words of submitting work to academic journals and how professors of colour are viewed in academia, refers to the dismissal of work like mine as “intellectual oppression,” (Grollman, 2016). Work such as this portfolio where I use my life experience as a springboard can be seen as narcissism and labeled as “meseach” or “me studies”.

In their article “In Defense of Me Studies”, Professors Philip Ayoub and Deondra Rose define “me studies” as “the investigation of issues that are closely related to the researcher’s own identity or otherwise play a prominent role in their own life,” (Ayoub, 2016). Such academic work is ousted by white academics. Topics examined in such work are racism, homo and trans phobias, and various forms of discrimination primarily by Indigenous academics and academics of colour. Similar to disability activists pushed to the margins of activism, academics from marginalized communities are pushed to the margins of academia. The difference being that it’s white scholars who are pushing Indigenous and Of Colour academics to the outskirts of the academy. Ayoub and Rose

write, "...marginalizing scholars who embrace the type of research would replicate the marginalization that they typically face in the academy and society more broadly," (Ayoub, 2016). In his article "The Unbearable Whiteness of Meseach" University of Tennessee Professor Victor Ray counters such critiques of such critical and needed work when he writes "white scholars do meseach all the time. In many disciplines, that is simply called the canon," (Ray, 2016). This is an example of whiteness and "white is right", (McGregor, Personal Communication, 2008). White normativity sets societal standards because of the dominant position of white folks. In academia, white academics use their position to dominate and dictate what is 'real' research and what is not. But as Ray truthfully argues "scholars have the autonomy and expertise to pursue questions they find interesting and relevant," (Ray, 2016). I don't believe in the word expert as we are constantly learning, and I am very young in academia. But, I know my life as a person with a disability, and I do believe in autonomy and the pursuit of knowledge I find interesting. And I believe that through this research based on my experience I am doing *kuzushi*—breaking the balance; I am decentering ableist, racist, and rape culture's ideologies and structures; I am fogging the white lens with non-normative ways of seeing and being.

## **Living with Disability and its Representations**

I do this portfolio knowing there are more people out there in society living with my bone disease. At the same time, it feels like I am alone in terms of having Osteogenesis Imperfecta (OI) because I have never met anyone with my disease. This is not uncommon for those of us who live with OI. Seven people of every one-hundred thousand in Canada have OI. In 2016, the TLC show “One In A Million” featured two women, Tiffany and Destiny, living with OI who had never met anyone else with the disease. Both twenty-one years of age and from different parts of the USA, multiple broken bones and isolation were their bond, (Siebert, 2016). In all my doctor’s appointments and hospital stays, most healthcare professionals have never met anyone with OI. Referring to the rarity of peoples with OI, one doctor told me as a child, “I’d have crawled on my belly twenty miles to meet and treat someone like you,” (personal communication, 1986); there was a sense of exotification going on during that visit; I was a rare patient similar to rare animals sought after in the wild. Recently, while being x-rayed for a broken finger in February the radiographer said she hadn’t seen someone with OI in “over twenty years”, (personal communication, 2016). I am not alone, but I am.

The year 2000 was the first time I saw someone in any form of media with my bone disease. “Unbreakable” featured OI but it was doubly compelling because I’m a fan of Black actor Samuel L. Jackson. David Dunn (played by Bruce Willis) is the white hero in the film. Elijah Price aka Mr. Glass played by Jackson is the villain. One of my favourite actors, a man of colour, played someone with my bone disease. Later, as I grew politically, I realized the stereotypical Hollywood characterization of a man of

colour living with a disability. Mr. Glass was portrayed as insane, evil, and desperate for a white savior to come into his life. Other than his love for reading Mr. Glass had no redeeming qualities. He's a serial killer hoping to find his superhero by taking innocent lives and waiting for a hero to emerge from the ruckus. Black is evil and white is good. The racism is evident to those who have a consciousness about everyday racism in our society and how media, in this case Hollywood, promotes this.

In his essay "Discrimination: Disabled People and the Media" British disabled activist and writer Paul Hunt lays out 10 common stereotypes, two of which fit how Director Shyamalan portrays Mr. Glass: "pitiable and pathetic" and "sinister or evil", (Hunt, 1991, p. 45-48). The pitiable and pathetic Mr. Glass looks toward someone outside himself, someone who does not break bones, someone who lives a life he'll never live: normal according to society, or beyond normal in the comic book sense. He constantly reads about the superhuman and superhero in comic books because his life is not one worth experiencing; fiction is worth more than his reality. The sinister and evil Mr. Glass kills innocent people, causes suffering, with the hopes of a fictional character emerging from the real chaos he creates. The Black disabled man represents the dark side while the white able-bodied superhero brings light to the world. "There was a big design premise which was that the David Dunn world was a warm world, and then the Elijah world was a cold, steely world," said Costume Designer Joanna Johnston in "The Making of Unbreakable" (Making of Hollywood, 2014). "Unbreakable" (2000) ends with Elijah Price aka Mr. Glass sitting in a wheelchair (after breaking his legs in a fall) talking to super hero David Dunn:

Do you know what the scariest thing is? To not know your place in this world. To not know why you're here. That's just an awful feeling...Now that

we know who you are, I know who I am. I'm not a mistake!...They called me "Mr. Glass," said Price with a smile, and a feeling of affirmation and a sense of purpose.

The film leaves viewers thinking a life of disability is nothing unless complimented or supported by a life of an able-bodied person. "Unbreakable" shapes the identity of disabled peoples as a "mistake", a burden, and often unwanted—they have no place in this world and live aimlessly in it. They are desperate, evil, and selfish. Is this the representation peoples with Osteo-genesis Imperfecta want? Is negative representation better than no representation? How does "Unbreakable" lead to a sense of affirmation and purpose?

In the mid 2000s, I saw a very different representation of OI in film: "Sixth Happiness" (1997). Written by, and starring, Firdaus Kanga, a gay Parsi man of colour living with OI in India. A BBC film shown at the 1997 London Film Festival, I saw someone with my disease who was likable, funny, witty, intelligent, a bibliophile, a writer, and who was not looking to able-bodied people to find validation or aim to be a super-crip. The first major difference between "Unbreakable" and "Sixth Happiness" is the character with OI is played by someone living with OI. In a 1997 interview with the "Independent" newspaper, the film's Director, Tatiana Kennedy said she "was very against having an able-bodied actor play someone disabled," (Rampton, 1997). The second major difference was the film was written by someone who knows what it is to live with OI. As gifted as M. Night Shyamalan is, he'll never know the reality of a life filled with broken bones and the constant threat of injury. Firdaus Kanga describes the film as "a story about growing up, not triumph over disability. Yes, it's about being gay and disabled, but it's not about the horror of being those things. There is pain, but it's

the pain of being a human being rather than being a disabled person. If just one disabled person sees it and thinks, 'someone has told my story and it's not false,' that would bring me great joy," (Rampton, 1997).

As much as I love film I am a reader and writer first. And with a book always being better than a film based on a book, I was eager to read "Trying To Grow" by Firdaus Kanga which "Sixth Happiness" is based on. With the Toronto Public Library only having one copy for reference, I bought my own at Glad Day Bookshop and read it in preparation for my talk "What's Wrong With Your Leg?". I wanted to read Kanga's words and use my imagination as opposed to view actors on screen. And I wanted a deeper representation that only a book can give. The book starts with the central character Brit (a nickname referring to his brittle bones) going to see a snake oil salesman who his father believes can cure him of his disease. Brit's parents have been advised to practice different remedies over the years: apply salt to Brit's legs, have him drink powdered pearls, and the list goes on. Growing up, my Mother had me drink massive amounts of milk and always talked of wanting to take me to mud baths and healing waters at Catholic sites around the world. Immediately, Kanga pulled me in with familiarity. He wrote of things only someone with OI could know. Regarding hiding his breaks, something I did as a child, Kanga writes:

It was simple. I didn't speak about pain as long as I could take it; that way I didn't have to admit something broke inside me. When my secret was out a cyclone hit my life raining tears, grief, guilt, defeat, (Kanga, 1990, p. 45).

Such a feeling is something M. Night Shyamalan, and best-selling author Jodi Picoult (2009) whose "Handle With Care" is about a child with OI, will never know.

There is an embodiment in the sentence Kanga writes. There is no research needed. His words are life on the page.

As an artist who is the son to an immigrant, my choice of life is one of disappointment for my Mother. The immigrant dream is for their children to be a banker, doctor, lawyer or school teacher. I am neither. This want is heightened when a child has a disability. My Mother is constantly worried about how I'll survive when she is gone. Kanga (1991) describes this perfectly: "...what are you going to do? You must find a way of earning when we're gone. *Be something—a teacher, a lawyer...*" said Brit's Mother (p. 81). I am a published poet, memoirist, and book reviewer; I am a reader and lover of books; I teach Judo; I have a university degree and will soon have a second. But I'm not a banker, doctor, lawyer, or school teacher. I'm not the American dream. And I live with weak bones.

While reading "Trying To Grow" I saw myself, laughed, nodded my head in agreement, and took three pages of notes while reading. Kanga wrote much more I relate with and share in this essay. I did not want the book to end. Kanga affirmed my identity as a writer of colour with a disability. He showed how art and literature from peoples with disabilities matter. He showed we peoples with disabilities are to be valued not pitied, and we contribute to society in different ways than the norm, or as Sunny Taylor points out, through different types of work, but we do contribute and we are valid members of our society.

Identity is not fixed. It is in constant action and development and changes through place and time. And it is formed in relation to others but does not make up a solid form. Peoples living with a disability are many drops that make up a pond. And the

disability movement is made up of just as many droplets. And those droplets are trying to be aligned with other bodies of water in the form of movements challenging different oppressions, at times successful in their seeking alliances, at times not. Still, peoples with disabilities push buttons, chairs, walkers, pens, keys, and they persist in their challenge of power—power from those who devalue them, ignore them, and set up obstacles whether on the left or right. This is the process of growth of identities and movements, and their relations with each other. With respect to Firdaus Kanga, we are not trying to grow, we are growing, and the growth is continuous.

## **Disability and Exclusion**

The World Health Organization International Classification of Impairment Disability and Handicap (ICDIDH) defines disability as “restriction or lack of ability to perform an activity in a normal manner,” (Thomas, 2004, p. 275). Othering and difference are key factors in this definition. We who live with a disability are defined as not normal. And able-bodied peoples are the gauge to what is a normal body and life. As opposed to viewing the lives of disabled peoples as different, and not in a monstrous way, the WHO ICDIDH, a large governing body with much influence in our world, labels people like me as abnormal. Such language influences ideologies affecting peoples with disabilities seeing them pushed aside to the margins of society.

The above definition of disability is ableist. Ableism “operates as a pervasive system of discrimination and exclusion that oppresses people who have mental, emotional, and physical disabilities, (Rauscher & McClintock, 1996). To say peoples living with disabilities are not normal is exclusionary and oppressive. Systems in power today, based on definitions such as the WHO ICDIDH, set up a black and white dichotomy practiced globally: abled and non-abled, normal and abnormal, centre and margin, included and excluded.

Through reading about my history as a person living with a disability, I have found that a five-stage process led to the exclusion peoples with disabilities experience today: Industrialization was the start, which led to Dependency as peoples with disabilities were left out of work, followed by Medicalization, leading to notions of Normality seen in the WHO definition shared earlier, to Eugenics. The exclusion of peoples living with disabilities started with nineteenth century industrialization

capitalism. “People with accredited impairments were increasingly excluded from paid employment on the grounds that they were unable to keep pace with the ‘disciplinary power’ of the new mechanized, factory-based production system. This exclusion from the mainstream economic and social activity was justification for segregating individuals with impairments in a variety of residential institutions, defining them as in need of care and supervision,” (Barnes, 1999, p. 34).

Prior to the industrial revolution, peoples with disabilities experienced a much different life than today. It was not a utopia but there was inclusion in the form of working “co-operatively with the family, the community and the ‘clan’ or band...individuals were rarely segregated from everyday life as a result of difference in performance,” (Barnes & Oliver, 2012, p. 82). With industrial capitalism, disability became pathologized, and as peoples could not work to support themselves their families struggled to support them in the process. “Waged labour made the distinction between the ‘able and less able...,” (Barnes, 2012, p. 83). Dependency was established and in came medicalization. “People with impairments, or ‘chronic ill health’, were subject to control and exclusion by this newly emerging group of [medical] professionals who readily seized the opportunity to increase their power and influence by classifying people in relation to the labour market and facilitating their segregation,” (Barnes, 2012, p. 83). Poor able-bodied peoples became bodies of labour in a new rising industry of production. And poor disabled peoples became the fodder for a new industry: the medical industrial complex.

The idea of normalcy was invented to support the medical industrial complex. The words “normal” and “normality”, used in the context of disability is rightfully

considered “hate speech” by disability activists,” (Barnes, 2012, p. 83). When humans believed in the “ideal” where everyone was imperfect, peoples with disabilities were an included part of society. When the “ideal” was abolished it was replaced with the dichotomy normal/abnormal seeing “the social process of disabling [arrive] with the industrialization,” (Barnes, 2012, p. 89). The deeming of some bodies as normal and others not, opened the door for eugenics, a term coined by Francis Galton, a cousin of Charles Darwin, in 1892 with the idea of “improving human heredity,” (Barnes, 2012, p. 94). Eugenics came in the form of forced sterilization, imprisonment in hospitals and nursing homes, segregation, and in the case of the two-hundred-seventy-thousand peoples living with disabilities murdered in the Nazi Holocaust—genocide.

Although we are long past the Nazi Holocaust, ideologies such as normalcy which supported and led up to genocide in Germany are still present; the WHO definition of disability is one example. In her essay “We Are Not Aliens: Exploring the Meaning of Disability and the Nature of Belongingness”, Priya Lalvani (2015) describes reactions she experienced when revealing to friends and family that her daughter Minal had Down syndrome: 1. Undesirable; 2. Burden; 3. Non-normative Motherhood. The WHO definition of disability, and the attitudes above that are related to it, are associated with the medical model of disability used by the WHO. Lalvani and academics and activists like her agree with and promote the social model of disability where “disability [is] understood as social injustices reproduced in all levels of society, structurally embedded in economic, political and cultural institutions, (Barnes, Oliver & Barton, 2002; Thomas, 2004).

The medical model has governed my life. Since childhood I've been viewed as, and told I am, not normal. The words "limitations" and "defective" were always used in reference to my body. Never was it made apparent that such views were wrong and oppressive. I internalized labels of non-normativity introduced by industrial capitalism, followed by medicalization, with a new extension: the incorporation of the education system in the wave of disability oppression. Never were disability histories and realities taught in my elementary and high school classes. Disabled peoples, and our history, were made invisible similar to Indigenous histories not being taught. And disability was always viewed with a narrow lens: someone living with Down syndrome, or in a wheelchair, or without a limb(s) and using a cane or crutch. When quoting Stuart Hall earlier in this essay, his writing of origins being forgotten so as to bring homogeneity and nationalism, (Hall, 1996, p. 616), I linked his words to race and colonialism. I shared how I never learned about Indigenous history throughout my school years: erasure. Similarly, disability history is experiencing such deletion. When talking with elementary school students for an academic project about disability and inclusion, Priya Lalvani (2015) was asked, "Disability Rights movement? What's that?". Part of the exclusion of peoples with disabilities in our society starts in the early years of child development. Children, curious as they are, notice and look at difference. When they see someone with a disability they are told by their parents, "Don't look!" As a child, I was told this. We are taught by our parents to avoid, and look differently at, peoples with disabilities. Originally, I was the one who was warned not to stare. Now, I've become the one parents warn their children to not stare at.

I clearly remember being in my elementary school gymnasium in grade-six watching a presentation by the “Special Olympics”. Many of the boys around me were laughing hysterically throughout the presentation. Those who were seen laughing got a verbal scolding from our teacher after the presentation. There was no explanation given about why laughing at children with disabilities was unacceptable, or how participants in the games should be respected for their dedication and effort, and that children with disabilities are people, not mistakes and abnormalities.

My elementary school not only erased disability history, it practiced what James Overboe (2001) describes as “Special Education is a kind of apartheid, (p. 36). A room on the first floor of our school was where students with intellectual disabilities stayed throughout the day. Not only were they segregated from the rest of the population, teachers used the room as a place of punishment for students who misbehaved. “Do you want to end up downstairs” was a threat used on a regular basis and followed through when teachers deemed necessary. Disabled bodies were used as shaming tools so as to keep non-disabled students in line.

Peoples are more than their disability. Growing up, I saw my friend Ronald experience a different form of ableism alongside mine. I was othered because of living with OI; Ronald was othered because of a mental disability developed after his mother dropped him when he was a baby. Ronald is also Black, and like myself, came from a home that had no father. Being Black, living with a mental disability, and coming from an immigrant working class single parent home saw Ronald treated very differently in my elementary school from other students. Ronald was a regular in the classroom located on the first floor of the school for three reasons: one, his mental disability; two, his

defiance to being treated as other; three, being Black. The third reason is a conclusion I've come up with over the years of learning about, and experiencing, racism. In relation to a body of colour such as Ronald's, Nirmala Erevelles (2011) describes such "alternative spaces" in schools as "[colonial] ghettos that use definitions of disability and intransigent pathology in order to allow forms of racial, class, gendered, and sexual segregation under the guise of special education and rehabilitation," (p. 72). She reaffirms this when writing, "In this way, disability serves as an "outlaw ontology" used to justify the exclusion of individuals on the basis of race, class, gender, and sexuality in the [colonial] ghettos of public schooling," (Erevelles, 2011, p. 72). Ronald is Black, had a disability, is defiant, and challenged different forms of oppression exercised on him. In a study of Black students with similar experiences to Ronald's, Erevelles (2011) writes of one of her interviewees: "All this is done to make sure they NEVER forget that this seclusion is THE punishment. Cassie's only companions were kids just like her. All black. All poor. All labeled. Their badness now branded into their dark skin with a single word: TROUBLE," (p. 109). I believe the imprisonment Sunny Taylor writes of applies to these temporary places of punishment where disabled bodies are isolated from the larger school population. Add other intersections such as race, class, gender, and more, and the oppression compounds. Ableism in terms of apartheid education is practiced in three ways here: seclusion; isolation; and ostracism.

If multiple identities make up who we are—myself being male, of colour, mixed race etc.—to exclude one part of us excludes the rest. Ronald was not just a person with a disability being segregated, he is Black, fatherless, and a son to immigrants. The segregation of Ronald was the segregation of all who he is. This is how exclusion

works. An example of such exclusion that led to erasure on multiple forms is the two-hundred-and seventy-thousand peoples with disabilities murdered in the genocide known as the Nazi Holocaust. Those who were communist or queer or Roma or Jewish and disabled experienced erasure via their political belief, sexuality, race, or ethnicity while also being bodies viewed as abnormal and “life unworthy of life” because of their impairment, (Barnes and Oliver, 2012, p. 95).

The industrial revolution was the start of ableism in the form of exclusion of peoples with disabilities in the workplace. Dependency resulted which lead to medicalization and labels such as normal and abnormal and the atrocities of eugenics that followed. Exclusion made its way to the classroom and is still there. The school system enforces this erasure and apartheid. Children who grow to become adult citizens follow suit in terms of what they have been taught. And exclusion continues.

## **Intersectionality**

Exclusion across different axes often works through intersectionality. The term coined by Kimberle Crenshaw to expose and contest “interlocking systems of oppression” (Collins, 1990) has helped empower activists and academics and further the causes they fight for. Intersectionality is my blood and bones, it is my experience, it is my lens, it is my words on paper, it is my way to off-balance power and to bring awareness of human multiplicities, and change via inclusivity. In the words of Kimberle Crenshaw (1989), “When they enter, we all enter,” (p. 167).

In writing of the influential theory intersectionality, I am laying down words from the position of a cis-gendered male ally to women in North America, and I have been influenced by Indigenous feminists and feminists of colour situated on the stolen land originally called Turtle Island. North American feminism, specifically that of Canada and the United States, the movement discussed here, is one part of the world, and although they fight oppression, in many cases many of the women in this movement, white and non-white, come from a privileged position especially in comparison to non-North American women. It is necessary to mention this because often, when feminism is discussed and explored it is done as if the only feminism, and feminist history, that exists is that of the wealthy countries of Canada and the United States of America.

It should also be mentioned that intersectionality has existed for a long time: people have lived intersectional lives and have practiced intersectional ways of being and doing long before academically recognized. Examples of non-North American feminists who practiced intersectionality are Bolivian labour activist Domitilia ‘Barrios de Chungara (1937-2012); Jamaican pan-Africanist Amy Ashwood Garvey (1897-1969);

and Indian social reformer and educator Pandita Rambai (1858-1922). An example closer to home is my Mother who is mixed-race, Indigenous, of-colour, Latina, cis-gendered, working class, an immigrant, lives with Osteo-genesis Imperfecta, and is a senior citizen. My Mother lives intersectionality while not knowing the term nor who came up with it. Black academic Kimberle Crenshaw gave a name to a long existing reality while recognizing she did not invent it: “I should say at the outset that intersectionality is not being offered here as some new, totalizing theory of identity,” (Crenshaw, 1994). Black academic Jennifer C. Nash (2008) highlights the unnamed practice and lived experience of intersectionality when writing, “Intersectionality has provided a name to a pre-existing theoretical and political commitment.” In other words, humans have been intersectional long before 1989 when the term came to academic life on the page of a journal.

Kimberle Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality in her 1989 article “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics” published in the first volume of the University of Chicago Legal Forum. Crenshaw brought attention to how women of colour, Black women in this case, could not bring a car company to court as “Black women” facing discrimination. The courts permitted peoples to bring cases of discrimination based on gender or race, not both. Crenshaw (1989) writes, “Black women sometimes experience discrimination in ways similar to white women’s experiences; sometimes they share very similar experiences to Black men. Yet often they experience double-discrimination—the combined effects of practices which

discriminate on the basis of race, and on the basis of sex,” (p. 149). Crenshaw was not only challenging the American legal system, she was challenging white feminism.

Later, Crenshaw affirms her previous words:

Put differently, the paradigm of sex discrimination tends to be based on the experiences of white women; the model of race discrimination tends to be based on the experiences of the most privileged Blacks. Notions of what constitutes race and sex discrimination are, as a result, narrowly tailored to embrace only a small set of circumstances, none of which include discrimination against Black women, (Crenshaw, 1989, P. 151).

Crenshaw’s argument was sound and needed, both then and now. And she added class to her race and gender position. But as Black academic Jennifer C. Nash points out, there “is a vague definition of intersectionality”, Crenshaw’s widely accepted and used term, (Nash, 2008).

Five years later in her 1994 article “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color” Crenshaw writes, “My focus on the intersections of race and gender only highlights the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed.” In my talk “What’s Wrong With Your Leg?” I introduced the concept of intersectionality by first giving examples of peoples in the crowd (with prior permission). I pointed to a man named Billy and referred to his being a man of colour, mixed-race, gay, and a survivor of cancer seeing him experience disability for a while. “These are intersections,” I said followed by emphasizing how we as people are not made up of one thing: race, gender, class, or disability etc. I then provided a definition of intersectionality from disability rights-activist A.J Withers who describes intersectionality as “...a multi lane highway with numerous roads meeting, crossing and merging in chaotic and complicated ways. There are all different kinds of roads involved: paved and gravel roads, roads with

shoulders and those without and roads with low speed limits, high speed limits and even no speed limits. There is no map. The most important feature of these intersections, though, is that they look very different depending on your location,” (Withers, 2012, p. 100).

Why was intersectionality needed at the time Crenshaw and her colleagues such as bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins wrote about it? Feminism, at that time in its Second Wave (1960s to 1980s), and merging in to its third, was dominated by white women. (Many say it still is.) And something more was desired and required. Crenshaw (1994) writes, “The problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference, as some critics charge, but rather the opposite—that it frequently conflates or ignores intra group differences. In the context of violence against women, this elision of difference is problematic, fundamentally because the violence that many women experience is often shaped by other dimensions of their identities, such as race and class.” In her article “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color” Crenshaw (1994) shares the story of a women’s shelter in New York who, based on a woman’s lack of proficiency in speaking English, would not accept an immigrant Latina woman who was seeking refuge for herself, and her son, after leaving her abusive husband and being on the streets for two days seeing her robbed twice. Both this Latina woman’s race and gender were factors, as well as her immigrant status and economic dependence on her abusive husband. Illustrating the shelter’s lack of intersectionality Crenshaw (1994) states, “This story illustrates the absurdity of a feminist approach that would make the ability to attend a support group without a translator a more significant consideration in the distribution of resources than

the risk of physical harm on the street. The point is not that the shelter's image of empowerment is empty, but rather that it was imposed without regard to the dis-empowering consequences for women who did not match the kind of client the shelter's administrators imagined. And thus they failed to accomplish the basic priority of the shelter movement—to get the woman out of danger.” The cases of Black women taking their employer to court while being denied the ability to identify as “Black women”, and the Latina woman denied shelter based on her language skills, make clear that activism and politics based on one aspect of a person’s being, and identity, were not working for the greater cause of combatting oppression, violence against women in both the above cases. The analysis of intersectionality brought forth new possibilities of justice which Crenshaw (1994) describes as, “Through an awareness of intersectionality, we can better acknowledge and ground the differences among us and negotiate the means by which these differences will find expression in constructing group politics.”

Is intersectionality the be all and end all of activism and academia? Is it flawless? In “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics”, Crenshaw (1989), while critiquing white feminists, writes, “For white women, claiming sex discrimination is simply a statement that but for gender, they would not have been disadvantaged,” (p. 144). Using an intersectional approach, this statement is not only inaccurate, it is not intersectional. Yes, able-bodied, cis-gendered, heterosexual white women have dominated feminism since its inception, and they will always have white privilege and benefit from white supremacy. But, white women, like all women, are not a monolithic group. What of white women who are disabled, queer, transgender, or poor? Many

white women fall under all four identities, I propose. I can list many more identities but my point is made. Many white women in the feminist movement and positions of power have done much disservice to Indigenous women, Black women, and women of colour. But many white women also face multiple oppressions which intersectionality is supposed to identify and address. As Crenshaw (1989) states, "...the failure to embrace the complexities of compoundedness is not simply a matter of political will, but is due to the influence of a way of thinking about discrimination which structures politics so that struggles are categorized as singular issues. Moreover, this structure imports a descriptive and normative view of society that re-inforces the status quo," (p. 167). It seems the "status quo"—white, cis-gendered, able-bodied, straight women who ignored their disadvantaged white sisters—pulled the veil over Crenshaw's eyes so she'd ignore the same women they did.

Not only have questions arisen around what intersectionality is because of its obscure definition, questions have arisen around who is intersectional? White men on the right, ignoring or oblivious of intersectionality being a tool used to combat patriarchy and white supremacy, have tried saying because they are white, able-bodied, and straight, they too are an intersectional identity. But more sound arguments from intelligent people have been made to question Crenshaw's theory, Black academic Jennifer C. Nash being one in her article "Re-Thinking Intersectionality". Nash (2008) makes her intentions clear from the beginning, "...my project does not seek to undermine intersectionality" and sees intersectionality as "the primary theoretical tool designed to combat feminist hierarchy, hegemony, and exclusivity." But she sees problems and has questions. Nash (2008) writes, "...intersectional theory has obscured

the question of whether all identities are intersectional or whether only multiply marginalized subjects have an intersectional identity.” First, to use Crenshaw’s words, “...the intersectional project centres the experiences of subjects whose voices have been ignored,” (Crenshaw, 1989), and was used to challenge the American judicial system, and the establishment in terms of a multi-national car company, two entities founded on Euro colonialism and who would not acknowledge the existence of Black women. For these reasons, I believe the latter. Nash also finds there is an “unresolved theoretical dispute” making “unclear whether intersectionality is a theory of marginalized subjectivity or a generalized theory of identity,” (Nash, 2008). Can the two classifications not be merged so as to avoid confusion? Dropping the generalization, and focusing of identities of marginalized subjectivity would help clear things up.

There are clear opponents to intersectionality who do not make the sound arguments Nash does. As Crenshaw (1994) clearly stated from the start, “ignoring differences within groups frequently contributes to tension among groups.” It is this that intersectionality was meant to stop for the greater cause of feminism, in particular women of-colour. In fighting is still here. And many white feminists are still stuck in the first wave of feminism. Well known UK journalist Julie Burchill (2014) slammed intersectionality in her viral article in the “The Spectator” newspaper, “Don’t You Dare Tell Me To Check My Privilege: Today’s Left Is A Competition In Shouting One Another Down”. Burchill (2014) writes, “the diversity movement has given us a rainbow coalition of cranks and charlatans. Which has, in turn, has given us intersectionality...In reality, it seeks to make a manifesto out of the nastiest bits of *Mean Girls*, wherein non-white feminists especially are encouraged to bypass the obvious task of tackling the

patriarchy's power in favour of bitching about white women's perceived privilege in terms of hair texture and body shape." Black feminist theorists such as Patricia Hill Collins, Kimberle Crenshaw, and bell hooks are viewed and described as "charlatans" by Julie Burchill, an influential white woman. Not a surprise. Burchill and the like are ignoring the differences, and practicing the infighting Crenshaw sought to change via intersectionality. Burchill (2014) continues, "Intersectionality, like identity politics before it, is pure narcissism." When cis-gendered, able-bodied, hetero sexual white women fought for their right to vote and work and ignored Indigenous women, Black women, Latina women, Queer women, Trans women, sexworkers, and women living with disabilities, it was not viewed as narcissistic. In come educated Black women who bring forth ideologies and theories of change and they are labeled as con-artists defrauding the feminist movement. A more open and inclusive article written in response to Burchill by UK journalist Helen Lewis (2014) states, "We need more voices, with different experiences of life, and we need to have uncomfortable conversations."

The call for more voices is not only happening in Women & Gender Studies, Critical Race Studies, and Indigenous Literary Studies, Disability Studies scholar Chris Bell (1974-2005) challenged and questioned white domination via his groundbreaking and important essay "Is Disability Studies Actually White Disability Studies?". Bell writes, "White Disability Studies...by and large focuses on the work of white individuals and is itself largely produced by a corps of white scholars and activists," (Davis, 2010, p. 374). I used two large stacks of books at Toronto Reference Library for this essay, and two of 25 were written by non-white scholars. My experience is telling—twelve years after Chris Bell died the problem he exposed still exists. Bell was a proponent of

intersectionality. In his satirical, clever, and provocative ten-point plan to maintain the white domination of Disability Studies, Bell writes, “3. Do whatever you can not to discuss those texts rife with possibilities insofar as parsing our intersections between disability, race, and ethnicity,” (Davis, 2010, p. 379). Bell, a Black man with AIDS never saw himself reflected in the studies he pursued and wrote to change this. Using Crenshaw’s theory as a platform made complete sense for Bell. The parallels of whiteness in Disability Studies and feminism are undeniable. Crenshaw’s words twenty years prior demonstrate this: “When feminist theory attempts to describe women’s experiences through analyzing patriarchy, sexuality, or separate spheres of ideology, it often overlooks the role of race. Feminists thus ignore how their own race functions to mitigate some aspects of sexism and, moreover, how it often privileges them over and contributes to the domination of other women. Consequently, feminist theory remains *white*, and its potential to broaden and deepen its analysis by addressing non-privileged women remains unrealized,” (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 154). In accordance with Bell and Crenshaw, Nirmala Erevelles warns of reading about race and disability with an “additive” lens and proposes a way forward “by employing an intersectional analysis that seeks to understand and transform the structures where power coheres in complex and dangerous ways. It requires that critical educators plant themselves firmly at the intersections of multiple differences to submit our educational institutions to a ruthless critique of the status quo,” (Erevelles, 2011, p. 119).

Adding to this, in her article “Feminist, Black, and Able: Representations of Sojourner Truth and Theories of Embodiment”, Professor Meredith Minister (2012) writes, “The stigmas of race, gender, and disability change when non-“normative” race,

gender, and ability are combined into one body.” Minister’s words remind me of a recent (August 2017) happening in my life when I took my Mother to a doctor’s appointment at Mount Sinai Hospital’s fracture clinic. After a three hour wait we saw a white doctor who talked to me the entire time (two hurried minutes) and never looked at my Mother. The appointment was for her, not I. As we waited to see him we overheard and saw him chatting and laughing away with other patients who were white and who did not have injuries as severe as my Mother’s: she was in a wheelchair, recently had surgery, and was experiencing much discomfort while other patients were able to walk and joke around. My Mother is a woman of-colour, an immigrant, and speaks English not as well as I but well enough to have had several jobs where communicating in English was necessary. To say the doctor was “dismissive” would not be enough to explain his interaction with us. First, the power dynamic of a white man interacting with an ill woman of-colour in need of his services has to be noticed. Second, the doctor’s assumption that because my Mother does not have an Anglo-Saxon name or appearance meant she could not speak English well enough to communicate with him was racist. Third, there was a disregard for her as an elderly woman via him speaking directly to me as if she was not in the room. Fourth, we needed his services, he did not need to see us, and therefore the power was in his court seeing him treat my Mother the way he did. The intersections of race, class, gender, and disability were present. This falls in line with Minister when she writes, “It is impossible, in other words, to explore Sojourner Truth’s subordination from the perspective of race minus a consideration of her gender or disability,” and why Minister believes in “the value of working at the intersection of race, gender, and disability,” (Minister, 2012).

Experiences like the one shared above are common in my life. For this reason, I believe intersectionality is theoretically helpful because it decenters whiteness as the social norm in the colonial-settler society where I live. Intersectionality empowers me to write about the ways in which ability, class, race, and gender, and other axis' of power work in conjunction to shape human and non-human realities.

## **Judo and Disability as Part of the Social & Cultural**

This journey of this Master's has taken twists and turns. At one point, I wanted to solely focus on rape culture which has now become a part of a bigger picture that encompasses everyday ableism, racism, and rape culture. The spark for this are incidents that happen at my Judo dojo (training hall and place of enlightenment). I've been doing Judo for many years, and I've broken many bones on my Judo journey. People at my dojo know I have OI. I share my living with OI on a need to know basis. People who grapple with me need to know. Sharing my disease is an attempt at prevention and protection. It doesn't always work. I type this essay with fingers that have been broken on various occasions.

I always do an informal social experiment at my dojo with new students. As a man who weighs close to two-hundred pounds and stands at five-feet-seven I am not viewed as someone weak. People can't see my bones. And many people do not notice my limp. I pass as able-bodied. Disability passing is defined as "the way people conceal social markers of impairment to avoid the stigma of disability and pass as "normal"", (Brune, 2013, p. 1). Newcomers to my club treat me like they do anyone else: with respect. I don't disclose my disability unless I am training with someone. And I gauge who I want to train with as not everyone is safe for me to train with. If someone becomes a regular to the club they find out about my disease either from me, or if I'm outed by a fellow club member. People at my club, and various people throughout my school and social life, feel the need to share my disease as a form of precaution which often has elements of othering. Disability Studies pioneer Adrienne Asch (1946-2013) "argues that disability is not part of her self definition...but is the basis of most other

people's definition of her," (Overboe, 1999, p.75). I'd rather tell people myself, as I am much more than my disability; and I'd like to be in control of who I share such personal information with for reasons of personal safety.

What I have noticed at my club is how some people, men in particular, change in how they interact with me when they find out I have weak bones. The respect goes away. And I'm viewed as lesser than because I do not compete, I do not fight, and I'm no longer a challenge or a threat. My knowledge is seen as secondary or of no value. On the Judo mat I've been told, "Jorge knows fuck all!", "Try competing and then talk," and I've also experienced blatant racism when called a "spic". In terms of my rank, I've been referred to as soon to have an "honourary" brown belt. I train and take Judo seriously, I've worked hard for, and earned, my rank. Earlier I wrote of disabled peoples and economic dependency leading to medicalization followed by exclusion. At the Judo dojo dependency takes a new form: accommodation. For the most part, people have to train differently with me. They cannot go full force leading some of them to believe I am not a real Judoka. I am dependent on my partners not slamming me to the ground like they can do with everyone else which sets me aside from the 'norm'. "[D]ependency has been, and continues to be, devalued and attributed to person's perceived as inadequate, (Overboe, 1999, p. 80). This leads to some people not wanting to work with me, my being avoided, dismissed, and ignored taking invisibility to a new level: "noticed by everyone and acknowledged by nobody," (Murphy, p. 239). An incident in August 2016 at my Judo dojo saw vile, racist, eugenicist language directed at me. There was a call for my castration, for me to engage in sex with my Mother, and my being referred to as less intelligent than the able-bodied white men at my club. This changed my Master's

focus. In two sentences directed at me, ableism, racism, exclusion, eugenics, and rape culture were used to diminish my personhood. I was being told I am not worthy of life, something many peoples living with a disability are informally and/or openly told by our ableist society.

Access, something disability activists often talk of and fight for, is not enough! I have access to the Judo dojo. I can walk up the stairs and open doors for myself. I wear the same uniform everyone else does, and I participate in the sport and culture of Judo; but, based on my race and disability, I am not accepted by some who stand on the *tatami*, Judo mat, with me.

Invisibility happens in private and public spaces. Homeless peoples, many of whom have different forms of disability from mental to physical, both visible and not, have become just another part of our sidewalks as opposed to the people they are. I remember being in a mall in North York, Toronto as a teen with several other youth who live with different disabilities. We were on an outing, our weekly break from the Hugh MacMillan Rehab Centre where we temporarily lived. One of my companions was a Somali survivor of war who lost his right leg. He began to dance in the middle of the mall floor as we waited for our time to enter the movie theatre. Wearing a baseball cap, runners, and shorts, he danced low to the ground balancing and moving on his left leg and two hands. We cheered him on as he twisted, turned, got up and moved back down, slid across the floor, and rolled; he was a Cossack minus a leg and white skin who danced well enough to be in a music video or perform on stage somewhere. Some of us were in chairs, some stood with canes, crutches, and walkers; all of us smiling, yelling, and clapping. Many people walked by but no one joined us in the

acknowledgement and celebration. Some stared in disgust, others looked with fear and surprise, most looked and quickly looked away whispering to the person beside them who would do the same. My companion was viewed as a spectacle, as opposed to someone showing his dance skills. He was a freak: black, bizarre, disfigured, out of place. We as a group were shown that we did not belong in the mall we had access to. We were treated as if it was best we stayed wherever we came from. We, my Somali companion being the centre of the extravaganza, were viewed as “cases, not persons,” (Quayson, 2007, p. 202). The incident brings to mind “The Ugly Laws” of the United States which saw the confinement and social restriction of peoples with disabilities so people perceived as “normal” would not be scared. The specialness of that moment, his performance, and our unified front, was its counterculture underpinning: the “ugly” performed and celebrated beauty. Not knowing it at the time, it was an example of “disability culture”, which expresses and sustains a positive disabled identity...[and] acts as a means of politicizing and cohering disabled people,” (Barnes & Mercer, p. 517). My Somali companion’s performance was counterhegemonic. He showed that a person with a disability, with one leg, can dance, and dance better than many able-bodied folk.

The impromptu dance performance described above, or what passersby that evening might have labeled a freak show, not only promoted and made visible disability culture, it challenged notions of able-bodiedness in two ways: one, it brought to light that to be able-bodied is not a guaranteed permanent state but rather one referred to as temporarily-abled. In a blog post on the website “Feminists With Disabilities for a Way Forward” writers Laurie Toby Edison and Debbie Notkin (2010) define being temporarily abled as “disability *can* come to any person at any time, that you can wake up able-

bodied and go to sleep disabled, just as you can wake up alive and never go to bed again.” When the industrial revolution hit, the loss of ability, or the temporality of one’s ability, was a major concern for those working in dangerous jobs: “Railroaders, miners, and others in dangerous occupations recognized that a disabling injury posed a central threat to manliness as they understood it...[and] disabling injuries threatened the very economic productivity and independence that had been key for American identity since the Revolutionary War,” (Minister, 2012); evident are the intersections of masculinity, ableism, and capitalism. Temporary ability is not to be conflated with aging which is how the term temporarily-abled is often misused based on the assumption that everyone reaches old age, and that those who reach elderly status are guaranteed to experience sickness and are in need of care. And two, My Somali companion showing his dance skills refuted the “personal tragedy theory” of disability based on the medical model of disability which “generated a view of disabled people as the pathetic victims of some tragic circumstance,” (Sullivan, 1991, p. 255). Personal tragedy theory has influenced not only academia but also our everyday culture. In a 2008 “New York Times” article titled “Behind The Opening Ceremony, A Paralyzing Fall”, writer David Barboza recounts the event of Chinese classical dancer Liu Yan injuring herself during a rehearsal for the Beijing Olympics. Barboza’s opening line ends with “[Liu Yan] faces the prospect of being paralyzed for the rest of her life.” Pity, an emotion disability activists do not want used in reference to them, is displayed in the article’s opening sentence and later when artistic Director of the show Zhang Yimou is quoted saying, “I feel sorry for Liu Yan, my heart is full of regrets.” Liu Yan, interviewed in her hospital room, displays how “disability tragedy theory” is now embedded in our everyday

language and thinking when saying, “I never imagined I could suffer such a tragedy...I hope one day I can just stand up like a normal person,” (Barboza, 2008). Cass Irvin (1994), disability rights writer and co-founder of the foundational publication “The Disability Rag” states “language shapes society’s perception of disabled people,” (p. xv). The New York Times article is one example of this. Pity, tragedy, and normalcy are promoted in Barboza’s (2008) account of Yan’s accident. This common ableist view was challenged by my Somali companion when he danced at the mall. I am not equating Yan’s fall with losing a limb in war; these are two different people, circumstances, and impairments. Nor am I diminishing the serious injury and life change Yan experienced. I am showing how “personal tragedy theory” is used to describe such occurrences. My Somali companion losing his leg did not stop him from living his life. He did not view it as a personal tragedy.

Changes in thought are needed for peoples living with disabilities to be accepted socially and culturally. Accommodation is necessary, but the thought process of having an inclusive society and culture have to precede, and go alongside, the building of ramps and elevators, and the many other ways to facilitate access in our society. Peoples, whether disabled or temporarily abled, are lives worth living, they are not tragedies. And visibility in private, public, and on the page, will slowly bring us to such a place and time. In her essay “Thoughts on Thinking Differently”, Tanis Doe writes, “People with disabilities often argue that it is not the disability that needs removal but the barrier. Let us be disabled, as that is who we are, they say; but allow us some dignity and equality,” (Shaw, 1994, p. 24). Removing barriers of the mind is just as important as removing the physical barriers that plague our ableist society.

## Change, Desire and Dreams

Questions are used for many reasons: clarification, contextualization, understanding, and more. In terms of activism, questions help make connections, bring desire, provide a base for naming and claiming, acknowledgement and visibility, and give just cause for disobedience, all for the goal of change.

Questions have been used as a direct challenge to power. In 1851, American Black feminist Sojourner Truth asked a group of white feminists at the “Women’s Convention” held in Akron Ohio, a very important question: “Ain’t I am woman?” Just over one-hundred years later (1966), Jacobus tenBroek, founder of the National Federation of the Blind, wrote the monumental paper “The Right To Live In The World: The Disabled In The Law Of Torts” where he asked, “Are humans to be denied human rights? Are persons after all not to be persons if they are physically disabled?,” (p. 851). As activists, artists, and academics who seek change we learn from each other and our past. We make connections. And we question power in similar and different ways as did those who came before us. As a person living with a disability who is of colour, Indigenous, mixed-race, working class, son to an immigrant, who has always been on the margins, I have not only questioned power, I also ask, do people like me belong?

Much damage has been done to people living with disabilities from the able-bodied world. For as long as peoples with disabilities have been treated differently they have desired equality. One thing we have to stop doing is believing we are all separate. In his same groundbreaking article where he asked about humanness, tenBroek attempted to make links with other oppressed groups showing solidarity when writing: “As with the Black man, so with the blind. As with the Puerto Rican, so with the post-

polio. As with the Indian, so with the indigent disabled,” (tenBroek, 1966, p. 851).

Reading this with an intersectional lens, I ask, can a Black man not be blind? Can a Puerto Rican not have survived polio? Can an Indigenous person not experience disability and poverty? Yes, yes, and yes. Although these words were written in 1966, groups fighting oppression today still view themselves as separate from others.

I am not the voice for all peoples living with a disability, just as I am not the voice for all mixed-race peoples, or working-class peoples, or any of my intersections. My vision is informed by life experience, contemplation, prayer, viewing happenings where I live, writing, and reading various forms of literature: poetry, essay, fiction, and academic articles. I view our separateness as a great force keeping us—the various groups who fight for change—from furthering our causes, something of which, in terms of disability (as written earlier), I am guilty of.

For example, to not recognize we are on stolen land in what is now known as Canada has us not see why Indigenous women are going missing or being murdered, having us not see that some of these women are mixed-race—Black and Indigenous—and how this relates to Black Lives Matter, with some of these women experiencing some form of disability and living in poverty, all of which bring in both the questions by Truth and tenBroek. More connections and intersections can be made, and more questions can be asked.

As written earlier, activists have a history of ignoring the struggles of peoples with disability. I was saddened to learn that the Civil Rights Movement, a movement that not only paved the way for many oppressed movements to fight, “rejected images of disability and thus further stigmatized disabled citizens in its own struggle for citizenship

status,” (Hirschmann, J., Linker, B., 2015, p. 11). After learning this I realized even though a movement is based on a just cause, and is highly successful, it is not always inclusive. Were there no Black peoples supportive of the Civil Rights Movement who lived with a disability? They too had a major aspect of their personhood, their being, their life, ignored.

Slowly, we are starting to recognize links between peoples and groups. Brendan Gleeson (1999), author of “Geographies of Disability” writes that disability as both life and a social identity “is characterized by a specific set of economic realities, including poverty, labour market exclusion, welfare dependence, and low pay...conditions [which] resonate with those that commonly define the experience of many women in capitalist societies...” (p. 197). Again, are not many women living with a disability? The American feminist movement, in its several waves has not yet made strong and clear links with peoples with disabilities seeing erasure happen from able-bodied oppressors and activists. The recent 2017 Women’s March saw millions of women globally rally around the cause of gender and race. There were pockets of disability but its main agenda was gender. Emily Ladau’s (2017) challenging article “Disability Rights Are Conspicuously Absent From The Women’s March Platform” brought light to this sad tradition amongst activism. Again, the struggle of women with disabilities, which often intersect with able-bodied women (specifically around sexual assault) were lost in the sea of chants, signs, and different forms of media opposing the current face of white supremacist ableist rapist homo-and-transphobic capitalist patriarchy: Donald Trump.

Activism and academia often intersect. My activism started in 2003 at University of Toronto (U of T). It is the place that saw me politicized. I learned and was able to

name injustices I had experienced. My undergraduate years saw me be elected as a member of the Native Student's Association, and board member of OPIRG Toronto; be the first Indigenous columnist and Editor-in-Chief at U of T; run the first ever book club at First Nation House University of Toronto where I focused on books by Indigenous authors and authors of colour; as well as start, and run, the "VIVA! Film Night" for two years where I showed political documentaries and feature films. Throughout this time, I added to the erasure of peoples with disabilities—people like me. Academics have added to this erasure as well. British Disability Studies Professor Mike Oliver wrote the provocative article "Final Accounts and the Parasite People" as a response to what he believed was abusive and extractive research: "To put it objectively...disability researchers are parasitic upon disabled people, for without the host body (disabled people) there would be no disability researcher," (Corker & French, 1999, p. 184). A public challenge for the betterment of not only academia but also the people (peoples with disabilities) who have endured the brunt of actions that have come out of such research. Oliver's words are true, needed, and brave. How can the ills Oliver exposed be remedied? Oliver proposed engaging in an unshackled way of doing research, removing the consequential physical chains from humans who are researched, and the mental chains from those researching them: "...I have come to the conclusion that if we are to eventually develop a truly emancipatory research paradigm, we must ensure that the discourse on which it is based is also emancipatory. For me that involves creating a new discourse which is based upon the idea of research as production," (Corker & French, 1999, p. 183). Researchers, as history shows us, have helped place peoples with disabilities in the oppressive realities they now experience.

Over the years there has been much distrust of academics by different groups who have felt the excavation of researchers who roll in with their methods, dig for information, and leave massive voids in the communities they enter. Oliver addresses this when writing, “Increasingly as oppressed groups such as disabled people continue the political process of collectively empowering themselves, research practice based upon the investigatory discourse and utilizing ‘tourist’ approaches by ‘tarmac’ professors and researchers will find it increasingly difficult to find sites and experiences ripe for colonization,” (Corker & French, 1999, p. 191).

Indigeneity and disability being two of my intersections, reading First Alaskan academic Eve Tuck’s “Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities” (2009), a letter for “primarily Native communities and/or urban communities—that have troubled relations with research and researchers,” (p. 411), put desire back on the forefront of my activism. In accordance with Oliver, Tuck points to the flawed tactics of many researchers who enter Indigenous communities; tactics she refers to as damage centred. Tuck (2009) argues, “...damage-centred research often leaves the surveilled or studied as “thinking of ourselves as broken” and describes, “After the research team leaves, after the town meeting, after the news cameras have gone away, all we are left with is the damage,” (p. 415). Many communities experience this: Black, Indigenous, Queer, Trans, Disabled and more. In opposition to destructive research Tuck writes, “I submit that a desire-based framework is an antidote to damage-centred research...desire-based frameworks defy the lure to serve as “advertisements for power” by documenting not only the painful elements of social realities but also the wisdom and hope,” (Tuck, 2009, p. 416). Throughout the article, Tuck (2009) asks

challenging questions: “What will be the outcomes and effects of this research in and on our communities? Are we certain that the benefits will outweigh the costs? What questions might we ask ourselves before we allow researcher entry?”, (p. 410). Tuck also makes connections with Indigenous and Black struggles and uses theory by Black feminist scholar bell hooks. Sadly, like many, Tuck writes nothing about peoples with disabilities.

Through my readings, and personal journaling, and time in the activist community, I have come up with a saying (informed by readings and life) that I truly believe in: “stand beside me, or behind me, but don’t stand in front of me.” Noted above is the reality of outsiders doing research where “[t]oo often projects do not emerge organically from the communities they are designed to enhance, but remain largely under the direction of external, professional ‘experts’, (Barnes & Mercer, 2010, p. 266). The medicalization of peoples with disabilities is an example of this. In her letter, Tuck (2009) writes, “a time for a shift has come,” (p. 415). She is referring to outside researchers and academics taking a step back and seeing Indigenous peoples look into their own communities. This is what the disability community wants and needs also, and what Oliver referred to when naming outside researchers as parasites. Mike Oliver believes: “...the production of all knowledge needs itself to become increasingly a socially distributed process by taking much more seriously the experiential knowledge that oppressed groups produce about themselves,” (Corker & French, 1999, p. 191). Furthering the notion of insider consent and knowledge in her piece “Disability Culture Rap”, Cheryl Marie Wade asks, “So what’s this disability culture stuff about? It’s simple: it’s just “This is disability. From the inside out,” (Shaw, 1994, p. 17).

In his article “What Am I Doing Here? Non-Disabled People and the Disability Movement”, Robert F. Drake writes, “...while it may be acceptable for ‘non-disabled’ people *to join with* disabled people *to lobby for* anti-discrimination legislation, it is in my view unacceptable for them to lobby on behalf of disabled people,” (Drake, 1997, p. 644). He is correct. And some academics, those who are allies, agree. In the spirit of asking questions around activism, change, and where one is situated in it all, Brendan Gleeson (1999) asks, “...I am not sure that it is appropriate for a non-disabled person, such as myself, to make this sort of political gesture,” (p. 197). Gleeson is listening to disabled academics such as Drake and asking questions so as to facilitate change; change within himself and his practice, and change in academia.

Along with questions, we, peoples who belong to groups experiencing and battling oppression, must start naming and claiming our histories and desires. Erasure as a tactic has affected many groups. The knowledge I have around disability history is through my own research. And still, I cannot name heroes and ancestors. Culture, writes Cheryl Marie Wade, is “about passing the word. And disability culture is about passing the word that there’s a new definition of disability and it includes power...Culture. It’s finding a history, naming and claiming ancestors, heroes. As “invisibles” our history is hidden from us, our heroes buried in the pages, unnamed, unrecognized. Disability culture is about naming, about recognizing,” (Shaw, 1994, p. 15). Not only must peoples with disabilities learn their histories, able-bodied peoples do as well. Through learning our past, and how academia and medicalization shaped society’s view of the disabled as Other instead of human, and how we came to be a tragedy that is to be pitied as opposed to people with different abilities and talents,

disability education will be better for all of us since, as mentioned earlier, one can wake up abled and go to be disabled; also, most of us have disabled relatives, neighbours, and community members, alive or dead, who cannot and should not be erased.

Naming and claiming is a benefit to us who are disabled, and a challenge to power: “Over the last two decades as scholars, activists, and patients have increasingly talked back to medicine, one significant point has been made over and over again with regards to normalizing interventions—hegemonic social institutions and discursive structures inspire intervention. Nothing is intrinsically “wrong” with bodies the argument goes, and medicine should not be in the business of normalization under the guise of repair,” (Talley, 2014 p. 43). We are disabled and proud!

In the spirit of naming and claiming, Eve Tuck (2009) notes “a paradox of damage: to refute it, we need to say it aloud,” (p. 417). In my poem “I Am Prepared To Live” which ended my talk “What’s Wrong With Your Leg?”, and ends “*Kuzushi*”, I named and claimed my humanity, disability, my history, my oppression, my right to be and belong, and my will to live through it all. “A poem” writes Cheryl Marie Wade, “gets said and passed along. And passed back. Amended. Embellished. And passed along again. Language gets claimed...Crip...Radical. True. Passing the word,” (Shaw, 1994, p. 17). Poetry is my refute to damage. Poetry is how I decenter white supremacist ableist rapist homo-and-trans-phobic capitalist patriarchy. Poetry is how I question myself and the world. Poetry is how I make connections. Poetry is how I name and claim. Poetry is how I bring forth desire. Poetry is the change I add to our world.

## **Conclusion**

I live with Osteo-genesis Imperfecta. My weak skeletal structure is not visible. The after effects of 32 broken bones sometimes are seen leading to questions such as “What’s Wrong With Your Leg?”. This difference I live with has been explored revealing how exclusion of peoples with impairments came to be. Societal forces have shaped a view of peoples who live with disability leading some of to us hide a large part of ourselves. Different models—medical and social—have dictated outcomes that have affected us. Changes are needed in our society so those of us who live with a disability are treated as humans and not tragedy’s. I have lived, and I’m prepared to live, through all this.

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