out of sorts: a queer crip in the archive

Ryan Lee Cartwright

I could try to write in the voice of a body easily arranged, a body requiring only a thoughtless stretch of limb or a self-controlled fidget to achieve comfort. Since that simple, graceful body is not my own, that would be the same as writing without a body. (Hershey, 2011, p. 131)

By the time I arrived at the John F. Kennedy Library, I was already out of sorts. I had travelled across the country, from San Francisco to Boston, to conduct research on the origins of the 1960s US ‘War on Poverty’. The Kennedy Library, which holds these records, sits remotely at the end of a peninsula. I was staying at the nearest hotel, but it was a few miles away. Before making my reservation, I had been assured by three different hotel staff members that their shuttle to the nearest subway station, where I would catch a bus to the archive, was wheelchair accessible. It was not. What the hotel had instead was part-time access to a wheelchair accessible van; the van was primarily used for transporting cargo, but if someone made a fuss it could be called upon to transport wheelchair-users. I made a fuss. Driving the van was a rotation of men who had no knowledge of how to secure a wheelchair in the back of a van and deeply resented being assigned to cripple duty. After I waited an hour for the ‘special’ van to arrive and another few minutes for the driver to move his non-human cargo out of the way, I manoeuvred my chair up the ramp and into the van. I contorted my neck awkwardly to avoid hitting the ceiling, as whoever designed the van had not considered the fact that the wheelchair might be accompanied by a human user, whose torso might stretch taller than the chair itself. As the driver took off, I braced myself, my unsecured chair sliding to and fro with the van’s fitful, lurching movements. The motion, combined with my attempts to resist it, sent my muscles into spasms. My inevitable failure to keep my head from acquainting itself with the ceiling left me with a dull headache. The heat from waiting outside triggered a chronic neurological condition, so I was on the edge of consciousness by the time I transferred from the hotel van to the city bus that took me the rest of the way. So yes, I was out of sorts when I arrived at the gleaming Kennedy Library overlooking Boston Harbor (Figure 1).

The archive, particularly a national archive, is not the place to be out of sorts. The archive is a site where individual records and knowledge writ large are shaped and sorted, canonised and excluded, organised into boxes and imperial discourses. The material spaces of archives contain and arrange historians as much as they do the records we read, exerting ‘tremendous and largely unspoken influences on their users’ (Burton, 2005, pp. 7–8). ‘Archive stories’, as Antoinette Burton (ibid., p. 21) contends, have
situated historians in the material spaces of our research labour, rendering archives 'pedestrian' and opening our work to self-reflection and critique. Archive stories have taught us that to do research in an institutional archive is to be surveilled (ibid.), subjected to the whims and political imperatives of archivists and librarians (Ghosh, 2005) or misgendered and unable to use the restroom (Rawson, 2009). Yet Burton (2005, p. 8) warns against archive stories becoming simple confessions of archival pleasure or archival dread, including exalted stories about the hardships of the ‘field’: the ‘drama of getting to the archives’, living in poor housing and dealing with ‘capricious archivists’. In situating ourselves in archives, after all, we must be wary of reproducing the ‘romances of the archive’, the kind of ‘adventure’ and ‘discovery’ narratives that share so much with the imperial projects that created state archives in the first place (Kent, 2001, p. 3). Yet Carolyn Steedman (2002, p. 19) argues that the somatic elements of what might seem to be a metaphorical archive fever—being enervated by travel and driven mad by the possibility of 'something left unread'; developing terrible headaches, 'extreme sensitivity' to sensory stimulus and limbs so heavy that they can 'only be moved by extraordinary effort’—might in fact be attributable to the physical conditions of the researcher’s labour. Such symptoms could be what she calls Real Archive Fever, an occupational health disease caused by exposure to dust and the bacteria that sometimes live among it. A story about archival hardship need not necessarily be a heroic claim to adventure, then; it might be a mundane workplace illness.

Some of us are weary, mad, in pain or sensitive to sensory stimuli long before we arrive at the archive. Feminist disability studies provides tools to imagine embodied archive stories about the quotidian

Figure 1  Photograph of Boston Harbor by the author. A wide blue sky dotted by puffy white clouds reaches out and down toward the dark blue water. Bits of green land and built structures are just visible on the horizon.
Source: Photograph courtesy of the author
Ride-hailing companies have had a dismal track record in the US, even after they began claiming to offer Wheelchair-Accessible Vehicles (WAVs). Since 2014, Uber and Lyft have been sued over inaccessibility nearly a dozen times (Taft, 2018) for not offering wheelchair-accessible options at all, offering wheelchair-accessible options that simply redirect the user to overbooked accessible taxis or offering ‘substandard’ service to people in wheelchairs. A 2018 study in New York City found that Uber and Lyft located WAVs for users only 26 per cent of the time—including 0 per cent of the time at airports—while they located non-accessible vehicles 100 per cent of the time (New York Lawyers for Public Interest, 2018, p. 4). In the rare instances when a WAV was located, the estimated waiting time was 470 per cent longer. No other ride-hailing company in New York had any WAVs. A California non-profit organisation, Disability Rights Advocates, found similar results in the San Francisco Bay Area (Said, 2018).

This archive story is not an adventure. There is hardship, but my tone is neither impassioned nor confessional. If you must, imagine it as weary, resigned. Imagine that the story returns to me casually when the conversation drifts to the city of Boston. This particular story is not deeply lodged in my heart or psyche, but stories like this—archive stories or otherwise—accumulate, erode and exhaust. I was in Boston for seven days, at the Kennedy Library for six. Each day, twice a day, I endured the same: a van that took at least an hour to arrive, a driver who resented the duty and a short but dangerous car ride. It was made clear to me at every level—from the hotel management who did not have a wheelchair accessible shuttle, to the front desk staff who did not understand the difference between riding a shuttle with other human guests and being tossed into the back of a cargo van with refuse—that to everyone around me, my bodymind was an ‘impediment that must be gotten out of the way’ (Titchkosky, 2012, p. 89).

On the second day, or maybe the third, I waited outside in the August heat for my ride home from the bus stop. I waited for hours. Still the van did not arrive. I am not a new cripple, so I knew what my options were. I called for a wheelchair accessible cab, but the waiting time was two hours. (Most major US cities have only a handful of wheelchair accessible cabs in circulation.) I did not call a ride-sharing service like Uber or Lyft, because at the time they refused to serve wheelchair users. I eventually rolled home on my own for the last three-and-a-half kilometres, but at considerable danger. The sidewalks lacked curb cuts and were badly askew in many places, scarred by jagged fissures and discontinuities. ‘Lacked curb cuts’ may sound benign, but when the sidewalk does not have functional curb cuts, I cannot use it. When I cannot use the sidewalk, I must use the road.

1 Ride-hailing companies have had a dismal track record in the US, even after they began claiming to offer Wheelchair-Accessible Vehicles (WAVs). Since 2014, Uber and Lyft have been sued over inaccessibility nearly a dozen times (Taft, 2018) for not offering wheelchair-accessible options at all, offering wheelchair-accessible options that simply redirect the user to overbooked accessible taxis or offering ‘substandard’ service to people in wheelchairs. A 2018 study in New York City found that Uber and Lyft located WAVs for users only 26 per cent of the time—including 0 per cent of the time at airports—while they located non-accessible vehicles 100 per cent of the time (New York Lawyers for Public Interest, 2018, p. 4). In the rare instances when a WAV was located, the estimated waiting time was 470 per cent longer. No other ride-hailing company in New York had any WAVs. A California non-profit organisation, Disability Rights Advocates, found similar results in the San Francisco Bay Area (Said, 2018).
And so I did, rolling along the shoulder of a six-lane boulevard at a speedy three miles per hour; sitting tall, yet still half the height that drivers expect from a pedestrian; making sudden movements, which drivers could not possibly anticipate, in order to avoid mangled bits of road. One might imagine that I was regretting my hotel choice at this point in my trip, but I was not. I had spent weeks researching lodging options for my archive trip. I could not stay in a short-term rental, because they were not wheelchair accessible, and there were none located in the vicinity of the archive. No other hotel in the area had any kind of wheelchair accessible vehicle. A few were near subway stops, so I strongly considered those. Then again, even if all of the subway stops were wheelchair accessible—and by now you may have correctly guessed that they were not—anyone who must use an elevator knows that US subway elevators are prone to going out at any moment. I knew I had made the right choices. Even though my choices had placed me on the ragged edge of Boston, rolling through potholes and litter as the late summer sun set, convincing myself that by merely being alert—safety first!—I could protect myself from being nicked by a three-ton vehicle.

My archive story will arrive in the archive soon enough. It was delayed by some transportation issues—perhaps you’ve heard? Here I am again, running on ‘crip time’.

Crip time means more than simply running late, being ‘slow’ or requiring ‘extra’ time, though it includes those. Crip time typically denotes the lovingly flexible and forgiving relationships to time that disabled people live with (Price, 2011; Kafer, 2013). In Disability Studies Quarterly, Ellen Samuels (2017) proposes six new ways of understanding crip time, delving into some of its ‘less appealing’ aspects. One of them is ‘sick time’. Despite the challenges posed by sick time, Samuels also finds joy in the time she spends lying on the floor, in the distinctive rhythms of thinking that it enables. Yet in the archive, ‘sick time’—that is, a sick researcher—is a near impossibility. Lying on the floor would certainly be prohibited in almost any archive, relegating a horizontal researcher to her temporary lodgings, unable to complete her work. If the research trip were funded by a grant, she would most likely not be paid without showing up on most or all of the scheduled days. If the travel were funded personally, whether out of the researcher’s own pocket or out of a limited research fund, then the researcher might feel her own self-imposed pressure to make as much of the trip as possible. Although the latter could contain an element of archive fever, it is also more than that. A flare-up of a disability or chronic illness, whether physical or mental, does not often heal according to the rhythm of an ordinary cold or flu. Consequently, a crip’s ‘sick time’ could last the entire trip, or at least threaten to; for some, it could last much longer. No American worker has sufficient sick time, even with a job as flexible as a tenure-stream academic’s. But then again, in this archive story, I wasn’t even especially sick. I was tired and stressed and out of sorts, but I wasn’t sick, not in that moment.

Once in the archive, I was not, for the most part, a troublesome guest. I fidgeted and shifted in my seat, drawing occasional attention from archivists and other researchers. My body and wheelchair were ‘in the way’ much of the time, especially since I had unlooped my power cord and tethered my wheelchair to the

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2 I thank Jess Waggoner and Zhiying Ma for nourishing conversation on this subject during the NEH Summer Institute on Global Histories of Disability in 2018.
wall to prepare for the eventuality that I might need a fully charged battery for a long trek home. I was physically and emotionally affected by the material I read and by other matters in my life, but my troubled affect went unnoticed—perhaps chalked up to my already-unconventional physicality, perhaps obscured by my more conspicuous disabilities, certainly a testament to my whiteness. I required ‘extra’ assistance with boxes and library carts, but that particular week I had the digits, dexterity and strength necessary to turn pages and aim a camera at them. (I do not always; my strength and dexterity vary, and the repetitive physical tasks of archival research are quite fatiguing.)

Despite shifting in my seat frequently and taking countless breaks to leave the reading room, my behaviour never evoked concerns that I was a ‘shifty’ person, the kind who might be profiled as a potential thief or vandal. I had loose wires dangling from electrodes that adhered to my skin, but even those did not raise alarms. In most ways, I looked as if I belonged. I am white and middle class, which granted me an enormous protective buffer around my atypical body and irregular behaviour. It also helped that although I appeared disabled, arriving as I did in a wheelchair, I did not appear ‘too’ disabled. I spoke English fluently, and I was familiar with the particularities of research at US national archives. Passing as male, or at least masculine, subconsciously assured those around me that I was sincere in my need for assistance. After all, no white man would be so vulnerable as to ask for help moving a few papers if he did not have to.

I may or may not have appeared out of sorts to others, but it took effort. My apparent belonging required the unearned advantages of whiteness, class privilege and perceived masculinity. Those benefits were buoyed by efforts to contort myself—to make myself small and contained, to keep my movements within the invisible boundaries of my work carrel—and to leave the room when my bodymind required more substantial departures from social norms.

Bureaucracy, as Titchkosky (2011, p. 1) contends, ‘constitutes forms of belonging’ through ‘regular procedures, normal participants, and typical processes’ that are formed in contrast to ‘the abnormal, the troublesome, or the exceptional’. Archives manage records and readers through those bureaucratic actions. Crip culture, in contrast, celebrates irregularity. It encourages us to flirt back at gawkers (Clare, 2003), to bathe in our drool (Moore, 2014), to revel in the fact that we have ‘so many different ways of accomplishing the same task’ (O’Toole, 2015, p. 40). Disabled people, whether they identify with crip culture or not, resist standardisation.

Given those conflicting approaches, it should not be surprising that ‘American archivists have not shown a particularly keen affinity for the disabled person’ (Gilardi, 1993, p. 701). No, that’s not fair—perhaps I am out of line, rather than out of sorts. That statement was intended to be descriptive, not prescriptive, and it is from a quarter of a century ago. In recent years, archivists have sought to include disabled people’s descriptions of materials pertaining to disability (Newman, 2012; Brilmyer, 2018), and both the Society for American Archivists (2019) and the US National Archives and Records Administration (Serene, 2008) have created white papers with best practices for making archives accessible. The best practices are deeply rooted in bureaucracy, applying the language of the law—the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act—to archival settings. But as poet Aurora Levins Morales (2013, p. 82) contends, ‘there is no neutral body from which our bodies deviate’. A researcher with an unruly bodymind has already been made not to
belong by the regularising archival procedures that reinforce her deviation from those norms. The disabled researcher’s shaking, seizing, stimming and drooling have been deemed ‘impediments’ to the important work of the archive and its orderliness. The proposed solution to this problem—the problem of being made to be a problem—is to approach the archive and speak the language of ‘reasonable accommodations’ and ‘barrier removals’, hoping for responses that take the form of ‘readily achievable’ rather than ‘undue hardship’ (Serene, 2008). I bear no ill will towards archivists, and I benefit from their deep knowledge and their generosity in assisting me. But as Alana Kumbier and Julia Starkey (2016, p. 468) state plainly, ‘access is not problem solving’. Access requires structural transformation.

I forgot to mention one part of this archive story, the archive story that barely takes place at an archive. I forgot to mention it because it slipped my mind. Just before submitting this essay, I searched my text messages to see if I had any additional documentation of my trip to Boston. I was reminded that I had nearly cancelled the trip one week in advance due to my justified apprehension about the lodging and transportation options. I was also reminded that I missed my original flight, because my wheelchair was deemed a bomb threat and subjected to significant additional screening (another experience that has become unremarkable). And I was reminded that on my first day of research, at 7:16am, I texted a friend about the hotel van. I mentioned to her that as I had backed down the wobbly ramp that the driver did not know, or care to know, how to secure, he told me, ‘If you fall, I’m leaving you here’.

Perhaps crip time is trash time. Crip time is feeling out of sorts from being sorted into a category of ‘human disqualification’ (Mitchell and Snyder, 2003, p. 850), from the threat or reality of being dumped out the back of a van at a Boston bus stop, from the fact that such events are so frequent that they are forgettable. Crip time is wasted time: time spent waiting for ‘assistance’ from those who treat you as waste, assistance that is only made necessary because your public existence has been classified an aberration. Perhaps—perhaps, trash time and crip time could have other inflections. Crip time could be trash talk time—the time used by wilful crips to ‘talk back’ to ableism, the time that crips spend chatting with others who have been sorted into the same trash heap. Or crip time could be an opportunity to discuss the disparate ways in which we are sorted into the trash and the different consequences of being discarded—and the racialised, classed and gendered ways in which we might be considered waste even if not disabled, and, consequently, how that has shaped our responses to trash time.

Sara Ahmed (2014) contends that being out of sorts is ‘how a body that does not reside properly within a system affects the system (becoming a distortion, a body in the wrong place, a willful thing)’.

Perhaps my body is a wilful thing, but I am not so sure that I am.

I tipped the driver quite well. My life would be in his hands for five more days.

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3 I am grateful for Karla M. Padrón, who was on the receiving end of this message, and for Tristan Poehlmann, who has been on the receiving end of many similar messages.
author biography

Ryan Lee Cartwright is an assistant professor of American Studies at the University of California, Davis, USA, and is affiliated with the graduate-designated emphasis in Feminist Theory and Research and the Cultural Studies graduate group. Cartwright’s book *Peculiar Places: A QueerCrip History of Rural White Nonconformity* will be published by the University of Chicago Press in Autumn 2020.

references


