



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Lyrical Ableism and the Disabled Poem Maddening the Creative Writing Workshop

Rob Macaisa Colgate

Department of Fine Arts and Humanities, University of Alberta, Augustana

Abstract

In referring to texts as “bodies,” we understand the poem as a living body with the capacity to be mad or disabled. Drawing on Kim’s notion of curative violence, this article explores the academic creative writing workshop as an institutional force of so-called lyrical ableism, creating normative standards of creative practice that are intolerant to inherently harmless differences in form and style. The article suggests that care networks might be formed not only between fellow poets, but between poets and their own poems. Suggestions are given for maddening the writing workshop in the vein of Chandler’s “cripping the arts,” outlining a process that identifies (alleged) flaws in early drafts as components of the poem’s madness before using an access-first framework to guide revision as an act of accommodation rather than violent elimination.

Keywords

Mad Studies, ableism, disability, creative writing, poetry

History

Received 30 May 2024

Revised 2 March 2025

Accepted 3 July 2025

Body

So often in casual conversation we refer to language as a body: body paragraphs, the body of the text, ideas being embodied through writing. Imagine that this is no accident. If we go on to understand the poem as a body, as a living thing we help survive, then we must recognize its capacity to be disabled, and for this to be a natural occurring state. Extrapolating further, we might acknowledge that this disability could be a social imposed characteristic rather than a medically accurate pathology. One step further: that this state might be a source of authentic identity and wonder rather than alienation and pain.

What might it mean to write towards mad and disabled poems? That is, not necessarily poems about madness and disability, though of course those might likely make their way to the page. But what might it mean to write towards poems that are themselves mad and disabled? Recently, in an editorial meeting for *POETRY Magazine*, a fellow reader was concerned about publishing a poem with verbs that they alleged to be “weak”. The rest of the team, including myself, agreed: the verbs were weak. But they lived there, and it was clear to many of us that the poem remained of high quality. In that moment, I thought of the archaic term for madness *feeble-mindedness*. Why might feebleness disqualify the poem— particularly when a hallmark of madness is the poetry of unconventional and disorganized language itself?

Our conversation pushed at this intersection of weakness and quality. What if linguistic musicality acted as an alternative path towards meaning in allowing the feeble verbs to express their madness? What if careful attention to lineation gave the verbs a chance to rest and manage their exertion? Every choice in diction could function as a carefully elected psychiatric medication. Every choice in stanza could function as a mobility aid. Eventually, we accepted the poem for publication, recognizing that its success was in how it lived with weakness, in the ways that craft elements served as accessibility measures to allow the weak verbs to play their roles and contributed their unique valences to the poem’s character. Here, we saw the madness of the poem become an entryway for innovation as opposed to a purported source of inelegance that needed to be polished away. This experience begins to define a novel approach to craft: instead of revising the poem to cure it of its disabilities, the writer might instead identify those instances of madness and debility and provide them with access in order to support their brilliant existence.

The question becomes how to integrate this approach into creative writing pedagogy. As it stands, the standard creative writing workshop used in academic settings is one steeped in approaches that carry strong resonances of the medical-industrial complex. Popularized by the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, most creative writing workshops at the undergraduate and graduate levels operate under a silenced-author model, in which the workshoppee brings a piece of writing to their peers who are then tasked with decrying what is and is not working in the piece. The professor leading the workshop shares feedback similarly at the end of the allotted time, throughout which the author has been forbidden from speaking (Salesses, 2021).

The model, though still largely ubiquitous, is rapidly falling out of favor in academic creative writing spaces. Thinkpieces abound of how the existing process creates homogeneous, sterile, and unremarkable writing devoid of character and any real stakes. Much of the rest of its current critique rests in the deeply white underpinnings of the process. Novelist Junot Díaz wrote in a viral 2014 article in *The New Yorker* that explained how, while at the Cornell MFA, his “workshop reproduced exactly the dominant culture’s blind spots and assumptions around race and racism (and sexism and heteronormativity, etc.)” Similarly, the nonfiction

writer Felicia Rose Chavez wrote the guidebook *The Anti-Racist Writing Workshop* (Haymarket Books, 2021) in response to her time in the MFA at Iowa and beyond. As is often the case, the disability justice movement has the privilege of taking its cues from critical race work. How do we establish and advance an ableist critique of the existing creative writing workshop model?

Evidently, the model is rife with ableist and capitalist nomenclature: the mute author, the piece failing by not working, the writing needing to be stronger to be considered viable. In a class at the Tin House Writers Workshop, the poet Jane Wong expressed her discontent with this model: “I am not interested in making any of our poems perform labor for us.” The model is contingent on what Eunjung Kim terms as *curative violence*: “Curative violence occurs when cure is what actually frames the presence of disability as a problem and ends up destroying the subject in the curative process” (2017). How many poems have been destroyed in the removal of necessary verbs that were deemed too weak? How many poems have been denied authentic living and had their language psychiatrically sanitized by workshop participants who had no concern for madness not only as an artistic gesture, but as a relevant and meaningful subject?

The model has played a role in establishing normative standards of creative practice that are intolerant to inherently harmless differences in form, style, and content. Kim urges us to “consider that there might be a difference between wanting to become ill and wanting to be cured from the illness at all costs” (2017). There is no need to purposefully and artificially madden and disable our writing— but the natural variations in sanity that reveal themselves in the lyric are not something that must be transliterated by any means necessary into common sense.

Kim goes on to delineate how “[t]he violence associated with cure exists at two levels: first, the violence of denying a place for disability and illness as different ways of living and, second, the physical and material violence against people with disabilities that are justified in the name of cure” (2017). The coldness and elimination of uniquely textured writing that have become characteristic of the Iowa model are indeed justified in the name of cure, in the service of a certain strain of creative writing deemed to be elegant and robust. But the notion that disability can merely be a different way to live, rather than a one-dimensional suffering from incorrectness, can be applied to the poem in the same way it can be applied to any person. I propose the term *lyrical ableism* to describe the ways in which the standard creative writing workshop seeks to flatten, sanitize, and depersonalize the poem (and often by extension, the poet). In order to reinvent the workshop, it is necessary to take a distinctly anti-ableist approach to the poem, one that is unconcerned with elegance and robustness and instead seeks to find lyrical wonder even in the awkward, the crazy, the feeble.

In devising a template of a lyrically anti-ableist and anti-sanist workshop, I look towards Eliza Chandler’s notion of *cripping the arts*, an approach that seeks “to centralize disability and

madness in cultural production, representation, and experiences not only when this centring allows normative culture to proceed as it always has (perhaps the centering of disability would never allow for such a thing) but also, and especially when this centring disrupts normative culture” (2019). The idea is to move away from asking “how do I make this art accessible” and towards the question of “how do I use madness to guide the creation process?” Another way of questioning: what modes of mad and disabled living can be used to guide the creative writing workshop and move beyond the correctional, the punitive, the labor-driven, and the curative? Here, I move towards the framework of collective care.

Loree Erickson speaks of collective care as a “visceral practice [of] queercrip strategies that change the way we think about care, embodied difference, intimacy, and social organization. Collective care also makes practical interventions, building new practices to disrupt the disposability, commodification, and individualism that shape violent forms of state-based approaches to care and cultures of undesirability”(2020). Rather than attempt to rely on the perpetually insufficient care work provided by government social services, Erickson has her access needs met by a network of able and disabled friends who all take shifts helping her with daily tasks. Writing about Erickson’s care collective in her essay collection *Care Work*, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha notes that “access is posited as something she both needs and deserves, and as a chance to build community, hang out, and have fun—not as a chore” (2018).

What, then, if we positioned ourselves in the creative writing workshop as care workers seeking to create these delightful networks? Immediately, the dynamic changes from one of imposing needs onto poets to listening to what actual needs are there. Workshoppees might be able to use their voices to ask for certain points of feedback from the rest of the group. Their peers might then be able to provide this feedback rather than sticking strictly to discussing what they deem wrong with the poem or poet.

The framework can go even further: we can imagine ourselves to be care workers for our poems. The poems do the work, and all we must do is offer them the care that is necessary for them to live their lives, use their voices, have their revelations. Mad people often know implicitly that, were there sufficient space for them to experience their madness and not have it deemed an obstacle to productivity or presentability, the madness itself would not be a source of disability. Discomfort, perhaps, but not an explicit barrier from meaningful living and participation in the world. The lyrically anti-ableist workshop would provide this space for language to expand madly and authentically outwards.

And care work at its core is reciprocal. This is evident in the way that every workshop participant is at some point the workshoppee and therefore benefits from taking good care of the other poets in the room. Yet in taking an anti-ableist approach to workshopping, we are likely to start finding our poems themselves taking care of us, saying some necessary

thing back to us that we did not consciously think of. The workshop becomes a chance to form care networks not just with other poets, but with our actual poems.

Considering the aforementioned underpinnings of a lyrically anti-ableist creative writing workshop, I present one possible template for how these workshops might be held:

1. The poet shares their work with the group.
2. The group shares their initial value-neutral reactions to the work, commenting on specific elements of the poem's craft.
3. The poet shares with the group a madness or disability in their poem— some feature of the work, identified either by the poet themselves or by the group in the previous step, that the poet feels is essential to the heart of the work.
4. The group discusses the identified madness/disability and corresponding accessibility measures for it. These may already be present in the poem, in which case the participant shares how they see one craft element functioning to provide access to the identified madness. Or, these may be presented as non-directive areas of potential exploration. In this step, the poet is allowed to respond to others and direct the discussion away from conversational threads that do not feel relevant to the care work at hand.
5. The poet responds to the group and their accessibility proposals and asks any remaining questions.

Of note: the framework of lyrical ableism does not explicitly need to apply to craft elements that draw from madness and disability. Of course it can be used in this way; often in my own creative work I draw directly from my lived experience with schizophasia and word salad when rendering a particular speaker's voice. The anti-sanist response to this poem would allow those agrammatical gestures to communicate their own version of sensemaking; the access measure I most frequently reach towards when engaging schizophasia is a powerful sense of song, rhythm, and meter. Yet the framework applies just as directly to work that does not grapple with any particular marginalization. I once had a student write a poem about their obsession with the comedian Larry David. A brilliant choice, yet one that might quickly be dismissed as ludicrous in its unseriousness. In revision, the student and I pushed forward by asking: how might the madness of this topic be properly accommodated? Ultimately, the final draft of the poem was characterized by deftly crafted lines of spare and incisive solemnity. This careful approach to tone and diction was the access measure that best worked to support and generously deliver the madness of the elected topic.

Conclusion

The onset of lyrical ableism spurred by the academy is a relatively predictable one when considering the neoliberal, late-stage capitalist machines of the institution. Still, many good people with good ideas persist and produce from within the academy. Finding ways to disrupt academic standards from the inside is a constant project concurrent with the dismantling and obsoleting of institutional power. Reclaiming the creative writing workshop and centering mad and otherwise marginalized folks is one such gesture towards this disruption. The reenvisioning of the workshop comes with dreams of futures in which every mad person has a poem and every poem has a mad person, in which every poem is mad and every person is a poem. This future is just within our grasp, as long as we open our hand to let lyrical ableism fall from it.

Integrity statement The author certifies that this article is the author's original work, and has not been published elsewhere.

Conflict of Interest statement The author certifies that the presentation and interpretation of the material in this article have not been influenced for the sake of the benefit of any competing financial or personal interests.

References

Chandler, E. (2019). Introduction: Crippling the arts in Canada. *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies*, 8(1), 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.15353/cjds.v8i1.468>

Díaz, J. (2014, April 30). *MFA vs. POC*. The New Yorker. <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/mfa-vs-poc>

Erickson, L. (2020, June 18). *Thinking about and with Collective Care*. cultivatingcollectivecare. <https://www.cultivatingcollectivecare.com/post/thinking-about-and-with-collective-care>

Kim, E. (2017). *Curative violence: Rehabilitating Disability, Gender, and Sexuality in Modern Korea*. Duke University Press.

Piepzna-Samarasinha, L. L. (2018). *Care work: Dreaming Disability Justice*. Arsenal Pulp.

Salesses, M. (2021, February 15). *The Workshop Should Be a Model of Diversity—It's Not*. Poets & Writers. https://www.pw.org/content/the_workshop_should_be_a_model_of_diversityits_not