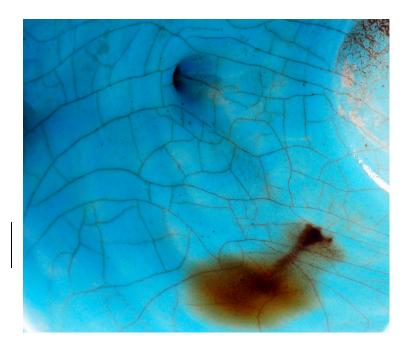
Cripping Revolution: A Crazed Essay

Abstract

The word *crazed* can mean "cracked." It can also mean "insane." Most often the usage is adjectival: *crazed glass*; *he looked crazed*. This allows the agent of crazing—the person or thing that caused the crazing to happen—to remain hidden in the tall grass of grammar. We do not say *She crazed me*.



Caption: A close-up photograph of a piece of sky-blue glass marked by a series of dark cracks which map it in irregular shapes. The glass is curved like a shallow bowl tilted toward the viewer. Near the bottom of the curve is a blurred reddish mark shaped somewhat like the Loch Ness monster in profile. Near the top is a hole that appears to be a small tunnel leading backward out of the glass and into another space.

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These are wonderfully illustrative. We may be able to include graphics, but I don't know yet. No problem—aside from the word map (later on), the images for this piece aren't critical to its meaning. I've always thought this photo would be a great book cover (fyi).

I am white. Nine years ago, I began teaching at Spelman, a historically Black college for women. That same year, 2004, I was labeled psychotic and prescribed medications called "anti-

psychotics." Those two events rest together in spacetime, unrelated yet contiguous, like a lint roller sitting next to a large-screen TV.

I am sitting in a hotel room in the San Jose Doubletree. Directly in front of me is a lint roller sitting next to a large-screen TV.

This is a crazed essay.

All My Names

I'm not usually at a loss for words—typed words, that is. I'm often at a loss for what to speak out loud. But it's unusual for words to be trapped in my fingers. I can feel them in there, like Carolina wrens in their tunnel-shaped nests, trembling.

Psychotic is not exactly what I was labeled. What happened, exactly, at the time of that medication change, was that my shrink told me I was experiencing transient psychosis. It was me who put the word through its other paces: psychotic, psycho. Psychotic! I heard voices! (They were uninteresting; all they ever did was call my name.) I lost control and harmed myself! (Panicked, I seized a clothes iron and smashed it against my head, raising a purple bruise, bringing out blood, terrifying my then-boyfriend forever.) And I experienced less recognizable symptoms, such as losing control of my vision. It jigged up and down like a hand-held camera in an over-directed documentary, nauseating me like a cheap carnival ride. Sometimes it narrowed as if I were looking through a cardboard tube meant to hold paper towels. Sometimes it blackened and made me blind while at the same time I could still see, see everything in the sharpest resolution. Those are the bad times, when I see things that are not imaginary, but are also not describable.

My friend Richard calls himself *psychocrip*. I am, I want to be, psychocrip also. But only if he is there to keep me safe while I call myself that. I call myself *psychocrip* in company.

Home

From the perspective of literary analysis, I am an unreliable narrator. The two classic instances of unreliable narrators: they're either lying, or insane.

In empirical research, *reliable* refers to the ability of an experiment to be repeated consistently, that is, to yield the same results under the same conditions. This sort of reliability is relatively easy to define in quantitative or experimental research; it generally means *replicability*. The term gets more complicated in qualitative research, comes to mean something more like *trust*. Does the audience trust the researcher—the narrator of the study? Do they believe his/her/hir account of what's happened? Reliability in that sense can get philosophical, start to scrape against concepts like truth, sometimes even justice.

Certainly I'm unreliable in the sense that I've started and stopped this essay a score of times, traveled from San Jose to Atlanta to Ann Arbor, tapped on my phone, written truths and decided they're lies, erased them, written them again. Like Descartes, like Patricia Williams, I huddle in my bathrobe, trying to get the words to speak my mind.

Like Descartes and Patricia Williams, I may or may not be in an actual bathrobe. The bathrobe might be a signal of where I am situated: home today, writing. Directly in front of the desk are two big windows. Through them, over the top of my computer, I see my hummingbird feeder, a granny-smith apple tree, and across the street, a cluster of empty red brick apartment buildings. The buildings used to be "low-income housing"—that is, the housing that goes to people for whom Section 8 is inaccessible—and there used to be kids on my doorstep every day,

asking to pet my dog or help in the garden. But last year the owner went bankrupt and forced all the children and grandmothers and aunties to move away.

Every single person who lived in the apartments is Black or brown. Every single person living on the other side of the street is white. Through my unreliable gaze I see a red line unrolling down the middle of the asphalt.

Check. Check Again.

Spelman College was established in 1881 and initially held its tiny classes in the basement of the Friendship Baptist Church. Although the school now bears all the trappings of a contemporary liberal-arts college—wide green lawns, wired classrooms, students milling from building to building with phones pressed against their heads—it is also, in a sense, sacred ground. It began as a place where African American women, some former slaves, became part of an organized, deliberate community based upon the knowledge that their education mattered. At Spelman, the archives of our school's history rest side by side with the papers of Audre Lorde, and our roots in that church basement are reaffirmed at every all-college gathering. These gatherings usually take place in the college chapel, the only building large enough to hold the entire campus community; the name of the chapel is Sisters.

I am sitting in Sisters Chapel, listening to Spelman's president, Beverly Daniel Tatum, tell the story of conversing with a white ally. This person said to her, "But I don't have a prejudiced bone in my body." She replied, "Check again."

A *check* can be something placed on a checklist to indicate that that a task is complete. It can also be a piece of paper promising later payment. In chess, it means *I'm about to get you*. In poker, it means *I'm not folding but I'm not putting any money in, either*. As a verb, it means

restrain or look again: check yourself. I remember that phrase from my early coming-out days; we used to say, "Check yourself, girlfriend!" It was usually said with laughter, but denoted something serious: the person to whom it was said had stepped over a line and needed to go back. Although the grammar is that of Black English, I mostly heard it from white dykes.

When I began teaching at Spelman, I already identified as an anti-racist. However, most of what I knew about anti-racism was derived from checklists, the sort you might be handed in a Women's Studies 101 class (at a predominantly white college): Listen to people of color. Intervene when you hear someone saying racist things, or witness an act of discrimination. Don't say "Some of my best friends are ..." Reflect on the intersection of race, class, gender, and disability. Read Peggy McIntosh.

But I'd never been sure how to apply these tenets to my everyday life. Did it count as racism when my white friend described her dentist by saying, "He's black"? And if so, what intervention would be appropriate? Should I ask, "Why did you point out that your dentist is black?" Colorblindness was bad (right)? I was a diligent student. Given a checklist, I wanted to start checking things off.

Checklists are important tools when talking about privilege and how to be an ally. They offer a starting place, a framework for further discussion. But they also contain an inherent risk: that the list will be seen *as* a list, rather than as a story. A recipe, not the dish made from it.

I didn't quite understand this when I came to Spelman. At that time, seven years ago, I did not want to be a racist, and so I assumed I wasn't. I hadn't yet learned that directives like *listen*, *reflect* and *understand* are impervious to check marks. Nor had I learned the difference between intentions and practice.

Practice can mean a regular, everyday ritual, like meditation practice. It can also mean the process of making mistakes, doing something imperfectly, and trying again. Laura Hershey, activist poet, wrote that *you get proud by practicing*.

Faced with the items on ally checklists, we must ask of each, "What does that mean for *me*—my bodymind, my history, the community spaces I inhabit? What does it mean not to *be* an ally, but to *practice* alliance?"

No one is an ally, any more than anyone is disabled.

Shortly before her death in 2010, Laura Hershey wrote a poem called "Translating the Crip." Its last line reads, "When I say *ally* I mean I'll get back to you. And you better be there."

Active Listening

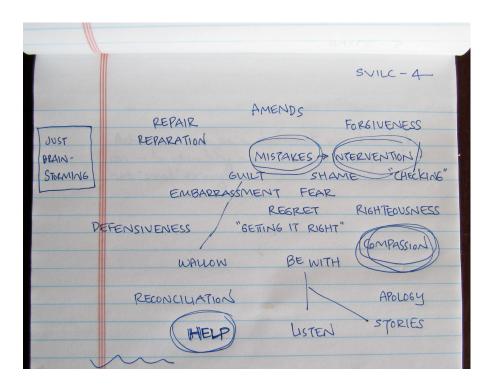
Listen. Generally one of the first exhortations you will see on a list of how to be a good ally. *Listen*. But what do we mean by this? What does it really mean to *listen*?

It no longer means something audiological, that is, the physical act of taking vibrations into one's ears and translating them into meaning. The metaphorical weight of *listening* has far outpaced its old Germanic root and now denotes something more like *attend*, *pay attention*, *absorb*. For a while "active listening" was a buzzword in communication, especially among those who believed men were from Mars. To listen actively you were supposed to lean forward, nod attentively, say "Mm-hm" or ask questions at appropriate intervals. This is not what I look like when I am listening actively.

Most conference sites are inimical to my ability to practice active listening. They present me with rows of small, uncomfortable chairs, large air-conditioned rooms, fluorescent lights, someone standing far away and speaking, usually without any sort of visual cues or signed

interpretation. Sometimes I take notes to try to help myself listen, pages and pages of notes, cross-referenced with stars and arrows and boxes. More often, these days, I knit. I try to look as though I am listening actively when I knit at conferences—I look up a lot, I nod thoughtfully—but that's a performance, put on for the benefit of those around me. It is an effort to mimic what Erik Fabris calls "sanism." Eye contact, for me, doesn't have a lot to do with what I'm really taking in. In fact, generally speaking, the more I make eye contact, the less I hear; eyes are terrifying and distracting. At the same time, offering eye contact (and all those thoughtful nods) are still a part of the way I listen, because listening is not a one-way flow of information. It's a relationship. If I'm making eye contact with you, it probably means that I am trying to offer you a gesture of respect. I am trying to show you that I'm paying attention.

When I do put down my knitting needles and start taking notes, it's because I feel the wrens in my fingers, fluttering to get out. I've heard something I want to be able to listen to later, so I try to capture it. During a race/disability workshop at a recent conference, I stopped knitting and began drawing a map of words.



While I was doodling this chart, I was thinking how the words *activism* and *ally* come together. I was thinking about stillness and action, listening and speaking. I was thinking about Laura Hershey's words: "When I say *ally* I mean I'll get back to you." I was remembering my own first baby steps into activism, as a member of a predominantly white queer nonprofit in Michigan. Back then, fifteen or so years ago, I had a great deal to say, and none of it was in words. The first job I was given was to fold our newsletter in half and staple it shut for mailing. I folded and stapled because that way at least I was doing something.

Fuck Coming Out. You Come In.

I'm tired of coming-out stories. Also, I am tired of coming out.

I've always been annoyed by notion of "coming out" because, as I've written elsewhere, it seems too tidy and linear to reflect my experience. Metaphorically, it suggests movement

across some threshold into a new and presumably larger space. A presumably *better* space. But that doesn't reflect my lived experiences of becoming queer, white, mad, femme, an ally, an academic, an activist. Those experiences, to me, are more like coming in than out—coming into communities, into new knowledges, into quietude, into forgiveness. And sometimes coming into shame and regret, admitting mistakes, trying to figure out what to do when I've made a mistake.

Can we please start telling coming-in stories instead?

I have agoraphobia. I don't feel like coming out right now.

Why don't you come in? It's pretty roomy in here, actually. And I made tea.

The Revolution Will/Not Be Folded and Stapled

I joined the Washtenaw Rainbow Action Project in my hometown, Ann Arbor, Michigan, in 1995. Our efforts were typical of pre-social-networking activity: We produced a paper newsletter and mailed it out to our hundreds of members. Like many LGBTQIQ organizations at that time—especially in the Midwest and South—we folded our newsletter in half and stapled it so that its queer content would not be evident from the outside. We marched at Pride in Lansing, Michigan; held an annual celebration for National Coming Out Day; and organized volunteers to help our members access medical care, do their taxes, and get legal advice. In those years, my mid-twenties, I was barely functional and still only learning about the ways in which I was disabled. All I knew was that I made regular trips to the hospital, I seemed a lot more sensitive than most other people to stimuli of all kinds, and I was sad and angry all the time. Nowadays I have more succinct names for all those conditions—but at the time, all I knew was that although I had to pay my therapist out of pocket and my health insurance kept getting canceled, survival was my primary concern.

It had not yet occurred to me, in the words of Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, that it might be possible to "community-organize flat on our ass in bed" (Azolla Story 21). I was still envisioning "activism" within a frame of physical able-bodiedness—activities like traveling, marching (on foot), chanting, folding, stapling, speaking. I had not yet heard voices like those of Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, Stacey Milbern, Mia Mingus, and Ashley Inguanta, who point out the intersectional privileges that accompany conventional images of activism. I had not yet encountered Susan Wendell's notion of the "healthy disabled," those who can predict the functioning of their bodyminds with some reliability. By contrast, Wendell says, the "unhealthy disabled" may seem like "unreliable activists," for "commitment to a cause is usually equated to energy expended, even to pushing one's body and mind excessively, if not cruelly" (25).

This realization—that the concept of activism itself might be saturated with ableist assumptions about our bodies and minds—was a coming-in moment for me. It was a new concept to realize that my struggles with showing up—for reasons ranging from brain fog to mental exhaustion to fear of crowds—were not simple failures marking me as a "bad activist." That there might be other ways to envision community. And when I say this, I don't just mean the exploding importance of digital communication and social networking to our activist efforts (although that's part of it). I also mean recognizing the role of quietude. Inaction. Even, as Ernesto Javier Martínez has suggested, a certain kind of passivity.

Practicing Passivity

Ernesto is a scholar of queer Latino studies. I heard him speak about this idea—what he calls *joto* passivity—at Spelman College a few years ago. As Ernesto explains it, *joto* passivity is a means of "internal deliberation ... find[ing] solace in miming stillness" and can be a form of

"recognition of oneself to oneself." The context in which Ernesto described this passivity is his own experience as a queer Latino man, having grown up in a family that was both abusive and fiercely loving, and having been routinely terrorized by schoolmates who cut him, threw him in sewers, and called him *joto*. His point is that a passive, silent response to abuse may be more than mere survival, simple waiting; it can be a space of deliberation, "an important place holder for radical meaning making." When I heard Ernesto describe *joto* passivity, it affected me profoundly, because during that time, as a faculty member at Spelman College, I had also been thinking about quietude. Quietude, and deliberation, and action—and I was thinking about mistakes I had made.

This is one of the things I think is missing from most conversations, especially among white people, nondisabled people, and others with privilege of various kinds, about what it means to be an ally. I think we talk a lot about having the right mindset, about our good intentions. I don't think we talk enough about our mistakes—what it *means* to make a mistake that stems from privilege or in some way reaffirms one's privilege. What does it feel like? And what happens afterward? I don't think we talk enough about the role of apology and—yes, I'm going to use this word—reparation in response to our mistakes.

If one brings what I'm calling a "checklist mentality" to one's ally work—the unstated assumption that good intentions are enough—then it makes sense that we would avoid thinking about our mistakes, avoid acknowledging them—except perhaps in the briefest and quietest way possible. But why should this be—especially here, especially in this gathering of disabled people and disability allies, where we know that to be wounded is to be marvelous, to be vulnerable is to be human? Can we, perhaps, in this gathering that I will loosely call "the disability community," find ways to *practice* our alliance in anti-racist work? For if anyone knows how to find the

workarounds, if anyone has been strong in the broken places, hell, that's us. Aren't we all crazed?

Crazy

I usually don't have much problem with the word *crazy*. I don't mind when my friends say, "That made me crazy," or "I feel crazy," although they often apologize afterward. So many of the things that are crazy are things I love: crazy quilts, crazed glass, myself.

I enjoy it as an adverb: *that's crazy cool*, *you're crazy smart*. And I enjoy being crazy *about* things, such as buttercream frosting. Which reminds me: my partner once told me that I was "a cupcake with crazy frosting." I like having crazy frosting.

But I don't appreciate being called *crazy* by anyone who isn't saying it with love and appreciation. I don't appreciate the use of *crazy* as a synonym for stupid, lacking, less than. And I have more and more activist friends who reject the term altogether, even call it hate speech.

I've begun avoiding it in my public speech, although secretly I think I might miss it.

Sometimes the Revolution is Funny

Several years ago I got tenure and was promoted to associate professor. When I learned the news, I rushed down the hall to tell my colleague Adrienne. She is the one whose office I've cried in, who has listened to the stories of my mistakes, who has told me about mistakes of her own. Adrienne is a white ally, one with more than thirty years of experience at Spelman. I watch her carefully, when she speaks, when she is quiet. I want to learn her ways of listening.

I told Adrienne I'd gotten tenure. She gave me a hug, then took me by the shoulders, grinned and said, "Welcome to being part of the problem."

Whitely

It's no fun to talk about our mistakes, but I believe that one part of cripping revolution is to do just that. Loudly. With trust and dignity. It is only through deliberation and exchange that we can find ways to move forward from our mistakes, to try to repair what's possible to repair, even to ask forgiveness if that can be offered.

Here is the story of one of my mistakes, made shortly after I arrived at Spelman.

Importantly, I am not telling a story of white guilt. (I did feel guilty about this mistake, but that's not the point.) I'm also not telling a story in which resolution came—if it ever did—in a clear or straightforward way. I am telling a story of deliberation, of what listening might look like, played out over time and in a particular community of particular people.

When I arrived at Spelman, I assumed that the campus lacked active LGBTQIQ organizing efforts, because those efforts were not legible to me, and did not take place in the kinds of forums I was accustomed to noticing. Second, I assumed that although I was white—in other words, an outsider occupying various positions of privilege—my queerness somehow trumped those other considerations; that is, that my queerness gave me license to speak out on this perceived lack of LGBTQIQ activism. I did not stop to consider that in doing so, I was replicating the behavior of many white activists in the feminist, queer and disability movements, and thus infusing my words with oppressions that were historical as well as situational. As a result of my unexamined privilege, I did some stupid things, including announcing publicly my belief that Spelman lacked LGBTQIQ activism.

Again, I want to emphasize that this is not a story of white guilt. Rather, it is a story of whiteliness. I am taking the term *whiteliness* from work by Minnie Bruce Pratt and Catherine

Fox. Whiteliness is "an attitude of judgmentalism rooted in the notion of white superiority and dominance in the United States. ... Whiteliness is not essentially attached to color" (Fox 199) but is rather "a way of being in the world" (Frye 151, qtd. in Fox). We must be cautious of white guilt, because self-excoriation—what might colloquially be called "wallowing"—is not the same thing as reflection.

In fact, focus on guilt is actually counter to creating change. Linda Martín Alcoff (citing Judith Katz) explains that a fixation on white guilt (or any form of oppressor guilt) is a form of self-indulgence, for it returns attention once again to the person in the dominant position and their concerns (12).

And yet. When I look again at my word map, it feels as if there's something important in the middle there, in that cluster of ink lines shaping guilt, shame, fear, embarrassment, defensiveness, and so on. It's very common, in conversations about race privilege, to refer to "discomfort." (*Discomfort*, by the way, strikes me as a stupendously whitely word. If you've ever been in serious discomfort, you ain't going to be calling it *discomfort*. But I digress.) But what might it mean to take up Ernesto's concept of *joto* passivity and consider its possibilities not just for the oppressed—for the *joto* himself—but for the oppressor as well? What would it mean to sit with some guilt? Is there a useful difference to be perceived between *wallowing* and *being with*?

What does it mean to apologize?

A Useful Concept from Al-Anon

"I feel like the piece of shit the world revolves around."

Forgiveness

I want to pause at this point, affirm Katz's point about guilt, but also mark out a difference in my own thinking. I don't necessarily share Katz's view that because guilt is an unhelpful fixation in stories of racism or whiteliness, forgiveness is therefore also beside the point. I see forgiveness as part of a larger effort to re-engage, to take part in community. And an important part of my perspective is forgiveness of self.

Forgiveness of self is key to any sort of community repair. This idea is echoed through a wide variety of traditions, ranging from conventional Western psychotherapy to Zen Buddhism. For example, my weekly meditation practice includes the following prayer, in the following order. (Before I relate the prayer, I'll mention that it includes the word "healthy," which in my practice does not mean "free from impairment or illness" but rather "well" in a more general sense, that is, having a bodymind free from disabling structures that prevent one from living as one wishes to.) Anyway, here is the prayer:

May I be happy, healthy, safe and free.

May you be happy, healthy, safe and free.

May all beings everywhere be happy, healthy, safe and free.

Forgiveness of self is central to the project of being an ally because, simply put, you won't be much good to other folks until you can get over yourself. Until you stop feeling like the piece of shit the world revolves around.

A common defensive reaction to living a life of privilege—a white life, a middle-class life, a cisgendered life, a male life, a nondisabled life—is to say, "Well, I didn't *ask* to be born

this way." Such a response avoids the true issue of forgiveness, which is that it has to do with mistakes. With foolish actions. With actions you wish you could take back, but you can't take them back, and so the only thing to do is to accept that something has broken and make your crazed way forward.

Forgiveness means understanding the word *wrong* not as an adjective, but as a verb. You do not need forgiveness for being wrong, because no one *is* wrong, abstractly, divorced from situations and people and places. You need forgiveness when you *have wronged*. And that verb is transitive; you cannot wrong unless there is a person on the other end of the sentence. There is always a *someone* whom you have wronged.

Now, I want to make it clear that I'm not talking about some sort of schmaltzy, uncomplicated forgiveness, in which one's guilt is absolved (burdensomely, by whomever you harmed) and one can therefore go back to a comfortable checklist mentality. Rather, I am talking about forgiveness of self as an aspect of self-care, as part of the always messy and sometimes painful recognition that each of us is vulnerable and also has unearned power; each of us is, in short, human.¹

Reflecting upon mistakes—sitting with them—*listening* to them—is painful. We prefer to remember the times we did a great job; we prefer to keep the conversation in general terms, shaped by lists of do's and don'ts. But we *must* delve into the particular. Again, not to wallow in guilt, and certainly not to place yet another burden upon those whom we have wronged. I'm not talking about going directly to someone you've harmed and asking for absolution. Rather, I'm talking about doing the work ourselves—in the case of the story I'm telling, in the company of

¹ Writings on forgiveness that have led to this perspective include Charles Griswold's *Forgiveness*; Kathryn J. Norlock and Jean Rumsey's "The Limits of Forgiveness"; and Kathleen Jones's "The Thirty-third Victim."

other allies—so that we can practice forgiveness of ourselves, because this is what makes possible forgiveness from others.

Forgiveness, I've found, often does not come in the form of a conversation—some sort of deliberately planned intervention or opportunity to "clear the air." My efforts toward forgiveness for my mistakes at Spelman have taken many forms, including asking for help from other white allies; engaging in shared meditation; offering child care; and knitting. Rarely do my efforts line up, either in time or in space, with the occasions of my mistakes. They come at unexpected moments. And they almost never come during moments that I myself have orchestrated. That last part was hard to learn.

It took me a while to knit in public at Spelman; I was afraid it would be perceived as a gesture of disrespect. Finally I started knitting in large meetings, sitting toward the back, so my twitching hands and gently clicking needles wouldn't be as noticeable. One day a colleague whose name I didn't know—a biology professor—stopped me on a way out of a meeting. "I saw you knitting," she said. She was not smiling.

"Yes," I said. I braced myself for the news that my behavior was unacceptable. I got ready to apologize.

My colleague was pregnant. "Do you knit things for babies?" she asked.

Cures, Fissures, Fixes, Cracks

A whitely response to making a mistake is the desire to fix it. Right away. To repair it without any sign of a crack, *disappear* it, make it as though the mistake never happened. To unremember, dismember it. Perhaps the counterpart of whiteliness would be *saneliness*, or what Fabris calls *sanism*. When the word is re-cast in that way, it's easier to discern the urge that

underlies that point of view: it's an urge for sanitation, for hygiene of many kinds. An urge to take away what's perceived as dark or disturbed, make it not so. A eugenic project.

A whitely question: How can I fix this? Tell me how to fix this.

It echoes with the desire for cure.

Being crazed is not the same as being broken.

Sitting with a mistake is not the same as fixing a mistake.

Sitting with a mistake is not the same as doing nothing.

But I won't lie to you: It does hurt.

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