2. Access Thievery

I’m going to tell you something, but you have to swear not to tell anyone. This is just between us crips, queers, and the people who love us, okay?

I fibbed earlier today. I told a little lie. Two lies, actually. They’re not something I’m proud of, but I don’t regret them. At this very moment, I am supposed to be in a meeting—not a particularly important meeting but one that has been scheduled for several months and one in which my absence will be noticed. In order to get out of the meeting, I told the organizer that I wouldn’t be able to attend because I had a family emergency. But I do not have a family emergency; that was a lie. In about an hour, I’m supposed to teach a class, but I canceled the class and told the students I’ve been vomiting. I have not, however, vomited and actually have a rather sturdy stomach. The real reason I could not attend the meeting or teach my class is because I did not want to. I did not want to attend the meeting or teach my class because I don’t have the bandwidth to listen to other people today. I’ve peopled too much this week, and a girl is tired of stimulation.

While I generally prefer to be honest about my access needs with colleagues and students, the truth is that today is Monday, so when I say that “I’ve peopled too much this week,” what I really mean is that I went out to dinner yesterday evening at a restaurant that was a decibel too loud, had a meltdown in the car on the way
home, and am now physically/emotionally/mentally unprepared for the workweek. So the real truth is that I have a sensory hangover, which isn’t something I’ve quite learned how to explain to non-autistic and otherwise nondisabled people who more often than not find themselves energized rather than depleted by excessive sensory stimulation.

What, exactly, would I tell them? “So I’m here, but just know that I will not be listening to anything you say. Also, this pained look on my face isn’t necessarily about you but actually kind of is. It’s not that I don’t want to be here; I just don’t want to be around you or see you or smell you or god forbid hear that screechy laugh you make every ten seconds.” Hungover Logan is kind of a bitch. Despite the generosity and patience of my colleagues and students, it remains the case that most of them are not operating on crip/trauma/mad time. They’re running to the beat of a hyperabled academic institution with all of its deadlines and schedules and chronological measures of productivity. I knew the moment I woke up this morning, though, that if I went about my Monday as scheduled, I would exacerbate my hangover, making each day this week progressively more difficult to withstand and rendering it next to impossible for me to write, to fuck my partner, to walk my dog, or to help an older friend clean her house. I told a couple of lies today because I recognized that I had access needs that would not be met if I did not meet them myself and that if I let my needs go unmet, I wouldn’t be able to provide the care that I’d promised to others. As a result, I did not ask for access. I did not arrange accommodations. And I did not wait until my well-being depended on others’ provision of my access. I stole the access that I needed in order to flourish. This is access thievery.

In the previous chapter, I went in pretty hard on access. Often the energy we expend demanding access from abled people and ableist institutions is wasted, whether because the access we’re given isn’t sufficient, the access is offered too late, or the access isn’t provided at all. Other times, the availability of access isn’t the problem, such as when the institutions, communities, spaces, or discourses to
which we are demanding access cause harm to others. There are lots of reasons for us to be suspicious of any disability politic that is focused more on securing disabled people’s entrance into a broken system than interrogating the brokenness of the system itself. Yet, there are still times when access is necessary.

For me, necessary access is constituted not only by the access we need to survive (e.g., food, shelter, healthcare, etc.) but also the access we need to thrive. I don’t think it’s particularly outrageous to believe that survival, alone, is not a desirable threshold for a life worth living. Everyone, including disabled people, deserve to thrive. We deserve to flourish. We deserve joy and pleasure and deep laughter. These things are not privileges, rewards we should have to earn through labor, or scarce resources we should have to ration. Sufficient access should include access to the lives we want for ourselves. This is the kind of access I mean when I talk about access thievery. It’s not only that we are stealing access but also that we are redefining what access means in the process. We’re not settling for survival. We’re stealing for our flourishing. We’re stealing because we’re owed the opportunity to thrive; we’re allowed to demand more for ourselves than just barely enough.

**Criminal Crips**

Before we go any further, let’s check in with each other. How are you doing? How are you feeling? If you’re anything like me, it might be a bit uncomfortable to talk about access in terms of theft. Regardless of our needs, it can be difficult to ask for help, let alone to take it without asking. Many of us have been accused of lying, of laziness, of selfishness, or of moral ineptitude because of our access needs. I cannot tell you how many times I’ve been told by relatives, friends, colleagues, and boyfriends that they cannot trust me—not because I’ve fibbed about needing to miss meetings but because they perceive my emotions as insincere or fake. Unless I exert tremendous energy to mask my autism by performing neurotypicality, I am routinely perceived as a fraudulent human, as a shifty, suspicious figure
whose tears come too easily, whose laughter bursts too suddenly, whose eyes fade to a hollow stare. For years, I did everything I could to earn back people’s trust that I’d never had in the first place, even if it meant ignoring my own access needs. I felt it my responsibility to compensate for others’ ableism. But there came a point when I realized that it’s not worth the energy to justify the access I need to flourish. It’s not my job to explain ableism to itself. If a person or institution is already loaded with prejudice against disabled people, presuming our immorality, fine—whatever. But I’m going to take my access regardless because I need it. Because my needs are more important to me than their opinion of me. Because what I need in order to flourish today carries more weight than their ableism steeped in yesterday.

The truth of the matter is that abled people have been fantasizing about the dangers of evil crips for centuries. These fantasies emerge from a moral model of disability that is drenched in rhetorics of racism, cis het erosexism, and classism that all assign moral value to embodied difference. Even before the category of disability existed in its present form, there were variations of ableism rooted in the belief that some “monstrous” bodyminds were predisposed to vice (Bearden 2019). These antiquated fears of monstrosity underpin contemporary assumptions about the untrustworthiness of disabled people. These assumptions are not so much consciously held as they are embedded into the fabric of our society, shaping everything from welfare programs to truancy laws to the definition of citizenship.

Since the founding of the United States, variations of the moral model of disability have been called upon to constrict and surveil the civic role of marginalized populations. Disabled, racialized, trans, queer, and poor people have been routinely excluded from the democratic process because of their alleged predisposition to criminality, and these populations’ collective absence has helped to secure the entitlements of the white, cis het eroabled upper class (Dolmage 2018). Using formal legislation to fuse disability and deviance, the United States has been able to maintain ideals of physical fitness and mental acuity as metrics for the moral purity of white
supremacy and, by extension, national identity. So long as disability and disabled people are regarded with suspicion—our experiences debated, our intentions questioned, our efforts doubted—the desirability and ontological coherence of abledness remain uninterrogated. Then, by suturing abledness to whiteness, disability is effectively racialized, further entrenching the criminalization of racial difference, especially Blackness. The grounds on which disabled people are politically disenfranchised depend not only on allegorizing disability to criminality but also purporting it as evidence of racial degeneration.

In his stunning analysis of “civic disabilities” in the nineteenth century, Andrew Dilts (2012) reveals that denying suffrage to disabled and incarcerated people has long been a legislative strategy used to restrict the rights of African Americans. Disability’s proximity to criminality was legally codified in a number of states during the years leading up to the Civil War because of the perceived threat that freed Black people posed to the white polity. “As developmentally arrested, and therefore naturally non-autonomous,” Dilts explains, “persons marked as criminal, idiotic, or black were assumed to be unable to work or even think independently, and therefore could not take part in the practice of self-government.” By explicitly disenfranchising incarcerated and disabled people, legislators were able to simultaneously protect the integrity of the white vote while “disarm[ing] claims of racial animus.” Since neither incarcerated people nor disabled people are exclusively Black populations, the racial logics underpinning their disenfranchisement are not always obvious.

Nevertheless, reflecting on the collective marginalization of incarcerated, disabled, and Black people today, Dilts points out that “U.S. jails and prisons have once again become Jim Crow asylums, filled primarily with persons of color, a shockingly high number of whom are mentally ill, and nearly all of whom are stripped of the vote.” The stereotype of the monstrously evil crip has evolved into the criminal crip: both are decipherable within a racial matrix that harnesses abledness as a vector of whiteness. Presumed competence
and righteousness subtend the white abled person in such a way that adheres disability and criminality through color-blind racism (for more on the ableism of color-blind racism, see Tyler 2022). In line with a crip negative approach to the category of disability, the figures of the evil crip and criminal crip not only haunt legibly disabled people but also threaten anyone who falls outside the racialized boundaries of embodyminded normativity.

Among the primary reasons I am attracted to the metaphor of access thievery is that theft—as both an economic practice and criminalized activity—gestures toward a genealogy for disability activism that is attuned to the racial grammar structuring the relationship between disability and criminality. Access thievery pulls the triangulation of race, disability, and criminality into focus by repurposing it as a practice of collective freedom, a means to pursue flourishing for multiple communities with a range of relationships to institutional access. For many folks, the only access available is stolen or foraged. Requesting access or accommodations from schools, employers, or government agencies is more difficult for those who are unhoused, unemployed, incarcerated, or undocumented. Institutional access itself becomes inaccessible when a person or population is excluded from an institution, even and perhaps especially when a person’s experience of exclusion causes or exacerbates their access needs. Access thievery becomes a way to name an alternative economy of access in which the needs generated by exclusionary institutions or institutional neglect are met in ways outside, beyond, or in addition to the access provided by those institutions. That is to say, access thievery is one kind of theft begotten by another: the crime of stealing access produced by the crime of systemic marginalization. Access thievery, like all forms of resistance, is simultaneously energizing for its liberatory impulse and harrowing for its conditions of emergence.

As I’m writing, I am thinking of Laurence Ralph’s (2012) discussion of “trade in injury” among Chicago’s gang members. For some Black and brown youth, gang membership promises forms of kinship and economic stability that are not always available in urban
communities that have been gutted by police violence and gentrification. Among Chicago’s gangs, disability is sometimes weaponized as a revenge tactic—disablement traded back and forth across rival groups. Ralph argues that injury, as threat and frequent obligation, structures relations between gang members, across gangs, and within communities wherein gang violence is common. On one hand, this injury acts as a form of “wounding,” bringing to mind both the experience of disablement and the conditions that produce it, including “the drug trade, or the criminalization of black urbani-
ties.” On the other hand, injury also acts as a form of “enabling” by mobilizing community efforts to reduce the frequency and effects of gang violence for future generations. This organizing is itself a kind of access thievery—one that culls together mentorship and educational opportunities for youth from the vestiges of violence and debilitation.

As an example, Ralph describes a community-run program called “In My Shoes,” wherein disabled ex-gang members lecture high school students on the effects of gang violence. The speakers recall their own experiences in gangs and the effects that violence has had on their lives. When talking about their injuries, the speakers “build their narratives out of the medical model of disability, in order to emphasize the biological reality of their now ‘broken’ body.” These narratives operate as crip negative testimonies to highlight “the scale of the social problems that African Americans growing up in violent neighborhoods face.” Rather than adopt a social or political model of disability that would pull focus away from their individual bodies and toward larger structures of power, these speakers lean into the “the sympathy, disgust, fear, and perhaps even the relief at being able-bodied” that the audience feels toward the spectacle of their disabilities. This approach, however distinct from typical disability advocacy, helps to draw attention to both the personal and community effects of gang violence.

When injury is traded within an extralegal economy, there is often little that can be done for the injured party, except forgive the injurer or exact revenge on the injured’s behalf. Rarely can injured
gang members appeal to authorities or institutions for help meeting their access needs; instead, they are left “to care for themselves,” to find and assemble their own access. By sharing intimate details about their self-care routines with high school students, the “In My Shoes” speakers effectively rehearse the context in which access thievery occurs while also foraging an alternative, predictive access for the audience. As Ralph puts it, the speakers “essentially disempower themselves in order to empower others.” The access that the “In My Shoes” speakers generate is intended to preemptively address the threat of injury facing students. This is a form of access operating within a crip negative temporality, wherein the concern about future injury is motivated by bad feelings surrounding gang violence in the present. Access to a less violent future is stolen and reappropriated from the compounded effects of institutional neglect, criminalization, and racialized debilitation. This is a mode of anti-ableism fueled by anti-violence at multiple scales.

It is worth suggesting that the true power and potential of access thievery lies less in its capacity to secure access to the world we already inhabit than the world we want for ourselves and our communities. We’re not only stealing access that others refuse to give us but also channeling that access to critique or undercut the people and systems who have refused us access. Access thievery puts pressure on the temporal and phenomenological boundaries of disability, exposing how access might refer not only to meeting disabled people’s present needs but also to heralding community wisdom to reduce the risk of injury, to prevent violence, and to manage expectations of debilitation.

Access thievery brings into stark relief what Jean Franzino (2016) describes as “disability in shades of grey” or when “the line between ‘disability’ and ‘ability’” is uncertain. It may seem counterintuitive to align anti-ableism with efforts to lessen the frequency of disability, given the long history of eugenic initiatives intended to eradicate disabled people. But it is important to keep in mind the multiple and entangled vectors of power at work in the process of becoming disabled, especially among racialized, queer and trans, and poor
communities. It is only by thinking across differences in the experience of disability that anti-ableism can be a vector of collective liberation. Sometimes this means centering forms of and relations to disability that do not circulate frequently in the field of disability studies, such as those occasioned by violence, by trauma, or by neglect and, as such, can be regarded as loss or as tragedy. Thinking with these forms of disability opens up conversations about whose needs are considered access needs, thereby urging a democratization of the field of disability studies that is more expansively attuned to the range of individuals who are fighting against ableism, including those who remain skeptical of disability’s desirability. Taking a cue from Alison Kafer (2017), access thievery might be best understood as a crip negative practice of “rebel health,” which “attends to health’s others, refusing to see health as a weapon or as a zero-sum game.” Rather than remain fixated on providing institutional access to people we already designate as disabled, access thievery blossoms outward toward those folks for whom institutional access is or would be difficult to secure. Access thievery is stealing what we need because we need it. It is foraging what we know you need because we once needed it. It is sharing what we have because that’s what we do. It is building a “we” where there was none before because it is only wrapped in each other’s arms that we can do more than survive.

**Sexual Access**

To end this chapter, I’d like to share the example of access thievery that first started me thinking about the concept and one that remains close to my heart. Some of you may be familiar with the Netflix show *Special*, a semi-autobiographical comedy starring Ryan O’Connell, a gay, white man with cerebral palsy. One of the first season’s central plot lines follows Ryan as he tries to lose his virginity. Like many disabled people, Ryan finds it difficult to navigate sexual relationships, especially in the gay community where whiteness, abledness, and thinness are the bastions of desirability.
At the suggestion of a friend, Ryan chooses to hire a sex worker to be his first sexual partner. Played by Brian Jordan Alvarez, the sex worker Shea expertly guides Ryan through his first time. The audience sees Ryan’s initial nervousness fade away as Shea does what he was hired to do, offering Ryan access to sexual knowledge and pleasure that he was struggling to find elsewhere. While interviews with O’Connell reveal a rather sanitized, liberal motivation behind the scene, I’d like to suggest an alternative reading that proposes erotic labor as a site for access thievery, an opportunity for critical solidarity between anti-ableist and anti-capitalist movements.

Following the premiere of Special in 2019, LGBTQ media outlets were excited to celebrate the casting of a gay, disabled actor to play a gay, disabled character. Couched in familiar commentary on the importance of representation, almost every article about the show mentions the sex scene described above. When asked to explain his intention with the scene, O’Connell frequently refers to his own, positive experiences with sex workers and his desire to destigmatize erotic labor. “I think there’s still a level of shame with using a sex worker and this idea of feeling like you have to pay for it,” he told Pride. “I think that ya know, do what you gotta do and don’t feel any shame in doing it. It is what it is” (Henderson 2019). In other interviews, O’Connell refers to his hopes to “humaniz[e] sex work” (Kirst 2019) and to “acknowledge” disabled people’s sexuality (Ryan 2019). The value of the scene, for him, lies in its capacity to normalize erotic labor by demonstrating the expertise of sex workers and their value for some disabled people who find paying for sex more accessible than other modes of sexual engagement. As admirable as O’Connell’s intentions for the scene may be, I don’t think they do justice to the political potentialities that it ultimately gestures toward. I am certainly not opposed to destigmatizing erotic labor or visibilizing disabled people’s sexualities, but both these goals are rather tame, given the intensified levels of policing that both disabled people and sex workers face.

What I find exciting about a sex scene between a gay, disabled person and a sex worker is not its potential to normalize but its po-
tential to align twinned queernesses: that of gay sex with a disabled person and that of erotic labor. Both are aberrant practices within the context of a society that idealizes monogamous, hetero-abled love as the most esteemed form of intimacy. More importantly, their appearance together highlights the solidarity that access thievery can generate. In the scene, Ryan isn’t stealing sexual access from Shea; he’s purchasing it through an extralegal, crip economy that runs counter to the forms of capitalism that structure heteronormativity. What’s being stolen is not the sex itself but access to sex, which Shea offers as a paid labor. Despite institutional and cultural prohibitions against disabled people having sex (Siebers 2012; Gill 2015), Ryan smuggles it for himself with Shea’s assistance.

Likewise, we can imagine Shea’s erotic labor as itself a form of access thievery that forages economic survival while refusing conventional waged work. femi babylon has argued that there is something deeply liberating about channeling erotic labor into an anti-work agenda. Attempting to normalize erotic labor by calling it “work” is, for her, a kind of “half-assed reform” (babylon and Berg 2021, 633). Proposing erotic labor as an example of access thievery is to lean into its anti-capitalist potential, what Vanessa Carlisle has described as “a politics of self-worth and community care” (2021, 577). In Shea’s case, the theft occurring is not interpersonal—he is not stealing from Ryan, nor is Ryan stealing from him—but structural. Shea is stealing a livelihood from an economy in which the forms of labor that constitute legally sanctioned work are narrowly defined and heavily surveilled. Together, Shea and Ryan are building a counter-economy through access thievery, one in which mutual care acts as a currency for collective survival.

In the show, we are not told very much about Shea. He only appears in one scene as a light-skinned, muscular man. There is no reason to assume that he, like Ryan, is disabled; he might not even actually be gay. However, it’s worth acknowledging that many sex workers are disabled or otherwise marginalized and choose to pursue erotic labor because it offers varying degrees of access that are unavailable through conventional employment (babylon 2019). Zia
Moon, a sex worker with a chronic illness, has written at length about how well-suited erotic labor is to her own and other disabled people’s needs. “Certain sick folks must navigate a gray area,” she explains. “What do you do if you’re too sick to hold down a full-time job, yet not ‘sick enough’ for disability benefits, and a typical part-time job isn’t enough to survive on—especially with medical bills?” (2018). Hayley Jade, a neurodivergent sex worker, agrees: erotic labor is “the perfect job for someone with ADHD and autism because there’s a routine but there’s also variety in my clients and how we spend our time” (2021a). Jade adds elsewhere that she appreciates being able to work with disabled clients, noting that “we’re both contributing so much to each other’s lives” (2021b). In her case, erotic labor is a rare opportunity to steal access for herself and remain in community with other disabled people by offering a service that many of us need. Access thievery is how she takes and how she gives.

Jade’s experience resonates with the scene from Special insofar as they both capture access thievery’s bilateral movement. Between sex workers and their disabled clients, access thievery works in two directions: applying to the clients who secure intimacy outside the strictures of institutionalized heteronormative monogamy and to the workers who push back against their exploitation under capitalism. Both figures steal access for themselves and for each other. Their thefts accumulate or interanimate as mutual resistance to sexual ableism and ableist capitalism. What Ryan steals is simultaneously invested into Shea’s flourishing; what Shea forages is redistributed as Ryan’s access. This is stealing the access we need to thrive ourselves so that we might be better equipped to aid and abet others’ criminalized modes of indulging joy and manifesting pleasure. Theft that enables more theft. Access doubling up on itself—multiplying. It’s pilfering a little time, a little energy, a little money, or a little affection in order to reinvest these same resources into others who need them.

Access thievery is all of the ways I do bad things in order to honor my whole person. Sometimes I need to be reminded that I am a
whole person worth honoring. Sometimes I need help replenishing my spirit, so I can honor your whole person because you, too, are a whole person worth honoring. While I wish we didn’t have to steal our flourishing, having to steal it doesn’t make it any less ours. It might not seem particularly honorable to fabricate excuses for missing meetings now and then, but I’m unsure that honor was ever in the cards for me. And that’s fine. I don’t need honor; I just need to go back to bed.
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