An Unglamorous Queercrip Account of Failure in the Writing Lincoln Initiative

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Abstract

Drawing on their embodied experiences as queer disabled graduate students directing a student-founded, student-led community literacy program, this article foregrounds queercrip embodied experiences to reinterpret normative notions of failure in community literacy programs. Using our own experiences as queer disabled graduate students directing the community literacy program, queer and disability theory, and community literacy studies scholarship, the authors unpack their own stories of failure and argue, through queercrip readings of that failure, that failure should be seen as generative, as relational, and as bound by institutional perspective.

What do *successful* community partnerships look like? What does *failure* look like in community partnerships? In this article, we (authors Keshia and Ada) reflect on our experiences of failure directing the Writing Lincoln Initiative (hereafter WLI). WLI, founded in 2011 by University of Nebraska–Lincoln's English department graduate students, collaborates/has collaborated with several local nonprofits and collectives to offer a range of literacy programs, usually designed with our community collaborators. WLI facilitates workshops, writing marathons, and literacy development initiatives in the local community. In what follows, we have consciously chosen to center our narratives and experiences of failure during our time as graduate student directors of WLI, understanding queercrip embodied experiences (a phrase we use to indicate pride in both our queer and disabled identities) and draw on queercrip theory as a lens to interpret failure(s) in community literacy. We argue that queercrip embodied experiences of failure offer a powerful critique of institutional power dynamics, especially as they relate to graduate student labor, academic ableism, and cisheteronormative institutional culture. In other words, reflecting on these failures through a lens of queercrip embodiment makes bare the values and ethics of institutions that frame these experiences as failures.

To begin, we share two brief embodied experiences of queercrip failure, though we believe it is important to briefly outline our positionalities first: Keshia is a white bisexual woman with depression and anxiety who has a multitude of chronic illnesses and chronic pain issues. Ada is a white, queer, genderqueer autistic person with overlapping chronic illnesses and disabilities. We share our positionalities–intimately intertwined with our brief vignettes below–because they shape our own notions and navigations of failure(s) within academic systems and are inseparable from our community literacy efforts. Because of the various mechanisms of

our cis- and heteronormative, ableist, white, capitalist systems, our queercrip identities have always marked us as failures, and this is always a precondition of our community engagement. One thing we'd like to emphasize within our exploration of queercrip identities and failure in community work is an emphasis on feelings of guilt, shame, and inadequacy–often tied to the metrics of what dominant systems mark as success. Community work is most often marked by collaboration, but queercrip individuals can often feel desperately alone within this work, especially when their bodyminds feel out of control in relation to what they'd like to accomplish. We offer these visceral moments of failure to demonstrate how queercrip identity is interwoven into our interactions with community.

Panicking into a Crock Pot (Keshia)

The table was full of food–chips, cookies, meat & cheese and veggie plates. And of course, a hot crock pot of Ada's homemade dip. I knew this would be good. It was the inaugural meeting of our newly formed LGBTQ+ Writing Club, a partnership with a long-established queer resource center, to create a space for queer and queer-adjacent writers to freely express themselves. The resource center seemed excited to be working with us; we had been circulating our advertisements for a few weeks, and a few people had already promised to attend. It would be a good hour, full of food and introductions and the setting of writing agendas for the school year.

When no one showed up at the five o'clock start time, I thought nothing of it, expecting most people to trickle in within the next ten minutes or so. Ten minutes passed, and no one came in. My heart felt as if something were tightening around it, in the way it always does when my anxiety gets frantic. For the next ten minutes, I

played with the food on the table, arranging and rearranging it to keep my shaking hands busy. At thirty minutes past the hour, I walked through the hallways – maybe people went to the wrong room, and maybe, if I found them, they wouldn't notice I was hyperventilating. Five minutes later, after returning to the room, I texted Ada. Ada, who would be co-facilitating this writing group with me, who had helped me prepare the food. Who couldn't make it to the first meeting because of previous obligations but would be at every meeting after.

> *I don't think anyone is coming.*
> *No one has shown up.*
> *What should I do?*

At forty-five minutes past the hour, I couldn't breathe, my chest felt as if it was caving in. I ran out of the room, pushed into the closest bathroom, and let myself come apart. What no one quite gets is how much of a panic attack is physical, the pounding heart and ringing ears, the tightening in your throat, the tingle in your fingers, the churning in your stomach. While I panicked, Ada replied in a series of texts, apologies and assurances, and the permission I felt I needed to clean up and leave. So I did, and still sobbing, called Ada and described to them where they could pick up their share of food, the heat of the crock pot burning away at my hands. They assured me it would be fine, that we'd make next week work somehow, that this new venture would be okay.

Of course, at that moment, all I felt was failure. And that feeling wouldn't go away for a long while.

Watching the Clock from My Hospital Bed (Ada)

I watched as the clock hands moved past 3:00 pm, and my heart sank.

I was supposed to be hosting a WLI event at a coffee shop across town with a group of unhoused writers, but I had no way to get there and no way of letting them know. I was still in my hospital bed, after checking into the emergency room about a few days before due to intestinal bleeding. What I hoped would be a minor problem, remedied with some intravenous medication, was not.

In my rush to get to the hospital, I hadn't thought to bring a phone charger with me: I left home for the emergency room in a hurry when the intestinal bleeding suddenly became much worse than usual. I failed to consider that I might be hospitalized this long. I tried using the landline in my hospital room to contact the coffee shop, finding their number in a phone book I borrowed from the nurse's station. But there was no answer. Right now, a small group of dedicated, unhoused writers were assembling at a coffee shop, waiting for me to purchase our bi-weekly coffees and talk about our writing.

But I wasn't there.

And the feelings–of guilt and failure–were compounded, not only because I knew they were there and I was not, but also because I *wanted* to be there and because of anxiety related to childhood traumas and autism spectrum disorder. I tried calling the coffee shop again, but still no answer.

In what felt like a cruelly slow afternoon, I watched as the clock hands slid past 4:30, and I sobbed. Feelings of guilt ate away at me: guilt that my writing group compatriots might think I'd abandoned them like the "do-gooder charity people" they complained about, guilt that I was failing the legacy of WLI and the exemplary graduate student scholar activists who had led the organization before me, guilt that my disabilities were once again eroding something I cared deeply about.

Later, I would try to communicate to my writing group what had happened, but participation in the group sharply declined after that week, trickling to nothing a month after. I worried that I failed them like "all the full-of-shit charities" they talked with me about, full of "nice-talking white people" that would treat them well for a week or two but then become distracted by something else.

It was that moment—laying alone, intestines bleeding, watching the clock in my hospital bed—when this small writing community fell apart.

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We reflect on our feelings of guilt, shame, and failure entangled in our experiences and persistent concern that we had not met the expectations of our community partners and institutions. We take up *storytelling* as queercrip scholars to highlight disabled experiences, to sort through these feelings of guilt, shame, and failure. As Hizer, Persin, and Bronson (2022) have argued, stories of disability in academia highlight the ableism of academic expectations. As Christina Cedillo (2018) has argued, "I assert the value of the embodied I/me as a strategic site of invention. We can use this inventive potential to address directly and strategically the rhetorical assumptions that exclude so many of us." We write alongside Cedillo in taking up our embodied experiences in

understanding institutional frames of success and failure, reflecting through our embodied experiences of failure in directing WLI as graduate students to emphasize not only where we felt failure in our community-engaged endeavors, but where we feel institutions failed *us*. In what follows, we elaborate on queercrip embodiment as methodology, offer an account of our embodied failures within WLI, and theorize the queercrip generative potential of failure in illuminating the ableism and institutional violence in university measures of success. We start with a brief composite history/overview of WLI, and what we've experienced as failures within WLI.

A Queercrip account of WLI's Institutional Failures

The Writing Lincoln Initiative began in conversations between graduate students who wanted to create a community writing center space, between the fall of 2011 and the spring of 2012. While an incomplete list, WLI exists only through the labor of our many scholars, colleagues, friends, and mentors who we worked alongside, including Kelly Payne, Katie McWain, Marcus Meade, Nicole Green, Bernice Olivas, Sherita Roundtree, Ashanka Kumari, Stevie Seibert-Desjarlais, Rosamond Thalken, Kathleen Dillion, Serenity Doughterty, Jordan Charlton, Alexandra Bissell, Elva Moreno, and many others. Part way through Ada's involvement with WLI, the English department hired Dr. Rachael Shah, a scholar of community-engaged work with expertise in community-university partnerships, and we are grateful for her continued mentorship and guidance. Over its ten-year history, WLI took shape, and was constantly reshaped by, a number of community relationships at multiple sites, and in the span of a decade since it began, WLI has collaborated with several local organizations,

including:

- An afterschool program for elementary students from low-income backgrounds, where we provided literacy support in the form of writing and reading classes
- A community organization for refugees and immigrants, where we assisted English language learners in navigating college applications and other forms/documents
- A shelter for unhoused writers, where we taught a course designed to help people start classes at the community college
- A meal center for struggling families, where we offered adult literacy programming.
- A rehabilitation center for individuals in addiction recovery, where we were asked to offer reflective writing
- A living center for at-risk young men with the oversight of indigenous elders, where we offered literacy programming for teen boys
- An afterschool program at a library, where we offered literacy workshops
- A campus club for disabled college students, where disabled writers composed and shared writing as well as met other disabled writers
- A queer resource center, where we ran a weekly LGBTQ+ Writing Club, meant to act as a safe space for queer writers to compose and share

These partnerships were created through relationships fostered by WLI members, almost all of us graduate students in the English Department, volunteering our labor for literacy work we believed in. Because we were not funded, formally, by the university, we were able to do this work in configurations that made sense to us, without having to think about how we'd "report back" to our

institution. As Hubrig (2017) wrote about alongside WLI founders Katie McWain and Marcus Meade as well as Rachael Shah, our faculty mentor and advisor:

> "We enjoyed considerable flexibility, autonomy, and agency in working with our community partners – shaping our program without departmental or institutional constraints. We chose the partners with whom we wanted to work, such as an addiction and mental health treatment center in Lincoln, without seeking university or departmental approval" (Hubrig et al 97).

While we did eventually negotiate with the department for a single-class course release in the spring semester for the acting director, WLI remained mostly autonomous from the department itself, able to make our own decisions based on carefully negotiating what was best for our community partners and what was possible for us to provide as volunteers with limited resources.

From the standpoint of our department, many of our programs resulted in "failures"– or rather, when it would have been helpful for our program to be used to promote the department, some of those partnerships had run their course, sometimes because the graduate student who had maintained that relationship had graduated and left, other times because our contact at the community organization left and the incoming director did not have the same shared vision of literacy programming. In other cases, community partners would ask for more than we had the capacity to give; we were simply no longer a good match for the community partner's goals.

But we maintain that reflecting on these failures through queercrip frames can tell us much more than stories deemed "successful" by institutional frames and tell us more about institutional orientations

toward community-engaged efforts. To that end, we work to unpack how some of these partnerships unraveled over time, reflecting on what institutions might interpret—and what we often felt–as "failures." Our reflection here focuses on four of these failures: a partnership with a nonprofit organization where we offered literacy programming for immigrants and refugees, a partnership with a shelter for unhoused men where we facilitated a class to help students enroll in community college, a partnership with an afterschool program for elementary schoolers from low-income backgrounds, and a LGBTQ+ writing group based in a queer resource center. We have intentionally left the names of these community partners unsaid because we do not wish ill will on any of these organizations. We take a moment to unpack how, from a university/institutional standpoint, each of these partnerships eventually failed, eventually rereading them through a lens of queercrip embodiment.

Programming for Immigrants/Refugees

One of our shortest-lived programs was with a nonprofit organization that assisted immigrants and refugees from South Asia in a number of literacy-related tasks, including reading mail, filling out application forms, and other tasks with primarily adult English Language Learners. Ada met members of this community organization while working in a writing center at a local community college that had to turn away those with the organization seeking literacy assistance as they were not students enrolled in the college. Originally, Ada would meet with members of this organization in the college cafeteria before their own writing center shift. As these relationships were built slowly over time, the organization approached Ada, having heard a bit about WLI, asking for a more formal partnership.

While Ada and a handful of other WLI members took part in this work through a formal partnership over the course of a semester, one of the reasons this partnership was so short-lived was our capacity and a mismatch for their needs: the organization requested materials we simply did not have and had no resources to provide, including access to technology, writing supplies, ELL books, and other materials. In an attempt to help procure these resources, Ada also assisted the organization in writing a grant proposal for the community partner to purchase a few computers, textbooks, and other materials that could be kept on site, but this proved challenging, and the completed grant proposal was ultimately rejected. The organization often worked on "walk-in" appointments, meaning WLI volunteers would sometimes be on-site all Saturday and see no one while other times we would be stretched past our capacity to provide literacy assistance. Through no fault of the community partner, the timeslots where they needed our assistance were ever in flux: sometimes they would have six people come for help with government forms on a Sunday afternoon, just before a deadline, and we would do everything we could to help. One evening, Ada received a phone call to meet a group of graduating high school seniors at an all-night diner to help students finish their FAFSAs and submit scholarship application essays—minutes before the midnight deadline.

When Ada's chronic illness required an extended hospital stay late that semester, other WLI members—most of whom had time-intensive commitments at other sites—simply could *not* sustain "on-demand" one-on-one literacy assistance, and WLI and our community partner amicably agreed that WLI could no longer serve their needs.

Programming for Unhoused Folx

In another short-lived program, Ada applied for and was awarded an internal mini-grant at a local community college where they were teaching at the time. Working closely with a shelter for unhoused men, Ada offered a semester-long program that helped students prepare for and enroll in community college. This program, in part, worked in conjunction with programs offered by a local business to help place community college graduates immediately in a job with the company. From the beginning, the shelter and Ada had a difference of values, with the faith-based shelter and WLI having differences in opinion. While we worked to respect the worldview of our community partner, perspectives of the shelter and the participants themselves were often at odds, and Ada felt a primary responsibility to the unhoused writers—rather than the shelter itself.

The original course had six participants, which dwindled down to four by midterm. One participant was removed from the shelter because of the shelter's policy for addiction relapse. Another member disappeared, presumably left town, according to a contact at the shelter. Of the remaining participants, three eventually enrolled in community college. However, because the grant stipulated *six* members, Ada was unable to be reimbursed by the mini-grant and covered these costs out-of-pocket, taking on an additional course as an adjunct to cover the expenses, including materials, transportation costs, and meals.

When it was time for the next semester, the shelter informed Ada that they didn't see a program that "only" helped 3 people begin college as a useful program, and Ada's second attempt at a mini-grant application was denied by the college. For the next three years, Ada worked more informally with unhoused writers on a

more nebulous, individual basis—eventually assisting four more unhoused people to begin community college——but any sort of formal program that might be recognized institutionally had folded. By this time, Ada's illness had progressed, and they required prolonged medical attention that prevented them from continuing the program.

Programming for Afterschool Literacy

As incoming leaders of WLI, Ada and Keshia inherited a long-standing program that was part of a larger after school program center. Under our leadership, this partnership faltered—and eventually failed—as relationships between WLI and the center deteriorated as those who originally created the partnership cycled out of position, both in WLI and at the center itself. As the people who fostered the relationships that made the partnership possible moved on, the role of WLI at the afterschool program became more nebulous: there was little to no communication between the new center directors and new WLI leaders. Though WLI and several other volunteers were regularly showing up to the afterschool program to run writing classes, the support networks at WLI that had previously existed to make our programming possible had also eroded. At the same time, WLI was asked to provide more in terms of material cost and volunteer labor.

At the end of the partnership, WLI and other volunteers were being turned away from their usually scheduled writing classes. Around this time, Ada received an email from a university administrator who had received grant funding to "help" the center, having no knowledge of WLI's existence. The university administrator asked us to cede operations, as part of the grant offered to pay local teachers in the English Education M.A. program to provide literacy training instead, with funding for materials and compensated time.

Though we initially felt a sense of failure in not being able to meet our community partner's needs and that we were letting down many of our WLI predecessors in seeing this partnership established by those who mentored us in this work, we agreed that this was in the best interest of the center. We couldn't provide either the labor or the material support that this new grant funded program could.

Programming for an LGBTQ+ Writing Club

In the semester following, Keshia set out to develop a LGBTQ+ Writing Club through WLI. This club would be held weekly on Monday nights within the queer resource center and would be open to any writer who identified as LGBTQ+ (or as an ally) and who wanted a safe space to write, especially regarding subjects of queer identity. In regular meetings, either co-or individually facilitated by Keshia and Ada, we would plan writing prompts, subjects, or themes, spend some time composing, and then have an open space to share that writing. Additionally, we often left space for writers to share compositions they had done outside of club time as well. One aspect of the club that we were especially excited about was that each month there would be a visiting professional LGBTQ+ writer who would share some of their writing and lead the club in a workshop about writing and that style.

Though advertisements for the club were circulated across several list servs and social media posts, there was very little interest in the club from the start. No one showed up to the first two meetings, and when attendees did begin to show up, only four to six people showed up at any given time. These few attendees were often hesitant to actually share any writing, and when visiting professional writers would show up, they rarely wanted to participate in the workshops those writers had planned. Meetings were often stifled and awkward, and though we tried to work

through different models of writing practice to increase engagement, the atmosphere stayed the same. What was most frustrating about this was that *we knew* UNL had a thriving LGBTQ+ community, especially in the English and Women & Gender Studies departments, but while people regularly expressed interest in joining the club, those same people did not show up. When the COVID-19 pandemic began in March 2020 and during that same school year, this club was unofficially ended and never restarted in the years since.

Queercrip Embodiment as Story; Queercrip Story as Methodology

As we reflect on our own feelings of failure and shame entangled in our community literacy experiences, we move to engage failure as queercrip community literacy scholars. Our understanding of failure(s) with/in WLI are informed by our engagement with queer and disabled theorists' work around failure and our own embodied queercrip experiences as well as ongoing conversations within community literacy studies surrounding failure and sustainability of community engaged scholarship and community partnerships. While we feel conversations around "sustainability" of community-engaged work at the university level often evoke longevity and, too often, smack of community exploitation by universities, we echo Laurie JC Cella and Jessica Restaino (2012), who describe the need for responsive flexibility. In the introduction to *Unsustainable: Re-Imagining Community Literacy, Public Writing, Service Learning, and the University*, Cella asserts "sustainability can be a more useful term if it is understood as something that can and should shift depending on community needs" (8). We orient ourselves toward Cella's expanded notions of sustainability, and the important distinction that "even short-lived projects" (9) can be considered

"successful" in their service to the community, but we are interested here in the embodied experiences and feelings of failure. Through our embodied experiences as queercrip scholars, we move to unpack moments where we experience feelings of dejection, of the uncertainty of community literacy work, of failure. While we understand "failure" is often rooted in necessary concerns around assessment and we emphasize the importance of ethical community engagement (see Shah, 2020), we wish to momentarily move away from *measuring* or *assessing* our community literacy. We worry that this focus on assessment only tells part of the story, and we take a moment to move toward the *experience*—rather than trying to quantify—of failure.

We see failure in community literacy work as queercrip community literacy scholars. As such, we draw on queercrip theory to help us understand our own experiences and build on emerging theory within community literacy studies. As Ellen Cushman and Jeffrey Grabill (2009) argue in their introduction to their guest-edited issue of *Reflections*, theory is both emerging and necessary in community literacy studies, stating "these attempts [at community literacy] require theory. Experimentation, exploration, and narratives rooted in personal or programmatic experiences often mark the early years of the development of a field" (3). More than a decade later, we see robust theories of community literacy emerging. We work to add to that theory, rooted in personal and programmatic experiences, but we find we cannot, and should not, do so without acknowledging our own othered embodied positionalities as we attempt to *do and theorize* this work. We see this work as a form of counterstory, as theorized by Aja Martinez (2020), which is a "methodology that functions through methods that empower the minoritized through the formation of stories that disrupt the erasures embedded in standardized majoritarian methodologies" (3). Martinez theorizes counterstory, drawing on the framework of

Critical Race Theory, "reject[ing] notions of 'neutral' research or 'objective' research and exposes research that silences and distorts epistemologies of people of color" (3). As Cedillo (2018) has argued about the field of Composition and Rhetoric more broadly, "we must foreground the ubiquity of embodied identities in our writing pedagogies, or at the very least, remember that experiences and practices are varied because they are grounded in our bodies." Writing alongside Cedillo—and drawing on Martinez to help us acknowledge how our whiteness also complicates our understanding of normative experiences with community engagement—we assert that theory is inextricable from our embodied experiences; in our case, embodied experiences as white, queer, disabled scholars, and that it's impossible to theorize our community literacy efforts without accounting for our personal and programmatic narratives of disability and queerness. As Ana Bê Pereira (2021) argues about academia:

> "A crip-queer framework of employment also understands that academia, like most places of work, is framed around the embodiment needs and expectations of cis, white, non-disabled men" [. . .] "These are bodies that are seen as belonging naturally to the space they are in and that are perceived (even as unreasonable as that may be) as reliable and normative."

We center our embodied experiences of community literacy, rooted in our experiences of queerness and disability, to help make clear how this normative expectation drives community literacy efforts within academia.

As we work through these stories of failure, we return to Martinez's theorization of counterstory and application of counterstory to our broader field of composition and rhetoric. We understand, through our queercrip examination of these reflections, how our

institutional position is rooted in "hegemonic whiteness" (Martinez 15), and see counterstory, "CRT's narrative method" (16), as helpful in our own understanding of queercrip experiences. This means both acknowledging our privilege as *white* queercrip folks *and* people with advanced degrees (see Martinez 17). But it also means connecting to the tenets of CRT, particularly "in their critique of a dominant ideology. . . and their sustained focus on social justice as an objective" (17). We engage these stories of failure to understand the interconnectedness of whiteness—working to understand how, as stated by Disability Justice collective Sins Invalid,

> "The histories of white supremacy and ableism are inextricably entwined, created in the context of colonial conquest and capitalist domination. One cannot look at the history of US slavery, the stealing of indigenous lands, and US imperialism without seeing the way that white supremacy uses ableism to create a lesser/'other' group of people that is deemed less worthy/abled/smart/capable." (18)

We take up Martinez's counterstory to both contend with our own privilege as white educated people engaged in community literacy and also to acknowledge how hegemonic whiteness, ableism, and cisheteropatriarchy (and other marginalizations) are inseparable—these dominant logics steer academia and its many institutions and form the "white, Western hetero-normative epistemology" that governs them (Hull et al). In taking up Martinez's counterstory, we aim to not only push back against the cisheteropatriachal and ableist norms of the academy, but to better understand and resist the hegemonic whiteness of institutional spaces as well.

To that end, we use queercrip theories to build community literacy theory *from* our embodied experiences as a form of cultural

rhetorics, “using the power of scholarship and storytelling to explore topics and experiences that have not enjoyed substantial exposure elsewhere” (Hildago, 2021) and understanding and unpacking our experiences of failure within WLI as queercrip embodied experiences, as we demonstrated with our opening vignettes. In what follows, we offer a short account of our experiences with failure within WLI that we move to unpack through queercrip scholarship that we feel offers useful insights for community literacy practitioners and scholars, working to understand how unbalanced power dynamics—and especially the confluence of ableist cisheteropatriarchal expectations bound in whiteness—are at the root of much of these perceived failures.

During our own time directing/co-directing WLI, we saw so many of WLI’s programs come to an end. Some of these failures were accelerated by COVID-19, some of them were the result of changes within our partner organizations, some of them were the result of our own limited capacities as queercrip graduate students. Yet, at the time, we felt each one. It hurt to see a program end that dear friends had begun, or that we ourselves had begun. We offer this overview of the work WLI has done over the years, so that we may be transparent about just how many of them have failed, in a sense, and how these failures were both variously in and out of our control. Here, we want to highlight that failure in community literacy is inevitable, and that in existing within that failure, as well as our queercrip bodyminds, we can see more clearly the institutional boundaries that first cultivated these failures, these moments of miscommunication, of lack of support or resources, or simple disinterest in maintaining partnerships. Ignoring, besmirching, or otherwise dismissing those failures does nothing for the overarching mission of community literacy work. Instead, we’re writing here to dwell in our failures for a moment so that we may understand what this failure actually means.

Reading Failure through Queercrip Embodiment

As our experiences with failures in WLI highlight, our queercrip bodyminds are not only inseparable from how we've engaged with community literacy efforts, but we also contend that these embodied experiences help us make sense of these narratives. In disability and queer theory, queercrip embodiment often destabilizes normative assumptions that establish the contours of our daily lives. We again echo Ana Bê Pereira's (2021) assertion that we perceive cis, white, nondisabled men's bodies as normative, as automatically belonging to this space and the too infrequently challenged belief that this space belongs to them. Our bodies are not imagined to be naturally occurring in academia and are definitely not imagined to be reliable--neither in academia as a whole nor in our community literacy efforts.

But we also acknowledge and move to unpack how *our whiteness is seen as "natural"* in institutional spaces. In understanding the queercrip *nonnormative* positionality of our bodyminds, we also reflect critically on the unearned privilege of our whiteness, working against the how whiteness is often unspoken in academic stories, reinscribed through "a standardized majoritarian methodology" (Martinez 23) that upholds racialized dominant narratives and white supremacy. As we push back against the cisheteropatriachal ableist dominant ideologies of institutional spaces that shaped our experiences with WLI, we also move to unpack how these experiences were shaped by whiteness.

From our experiences in which our queercrip bodies have destabilized both our own and institutional assumptions about

community literacy work, we've come to understand failure in three distinctive ways: failure as generative, failure in relationship building, and failure as institutional perspective. Though these categories certainly overlap, we offer these understandings of failure that work in tandem with our own embodiments of our white queercrip identities as well as act as critiques of systems which set up those with marginalized bodyminds to fail.

Failure as Generative: Community Partnerships as "Uncomposed"

First, we understand that our embodied experiences of failure can be a generative force. We argue that the moment of failure itself cannot be statically defined by lack but must be recognized as a moment to productively dwell within. Halberstam (2011) offers, "under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world" (2). Our queercrip experience of navigating these community partnerships—and *failing* at community partnerships—is that much was gained within the collaborations with community partners. In navigating these relationships, we learned a great deal about community literacy work, and our community partners often learned more about their needs.

What WLI rarely resulted in were fully conceived partnerships that could easily be products for university consumption: our partnerships were constantly being composed, constantly being revised around *both* our community partners' needs *and* our own. As Jonathan Alexander and Jaqueline Rhodes (2011) argue, "queerness is a gesture of the unrepresentable, the call for space of impossibility, and the insistence that not everything be composed"

(181). This, we feel, articulates not only both our identities as queercrip scholars/activists, but also as community literacy advocates, constantly balancing the precarity of sustaining partnerships, often through the illusion that they are wholly composed when they are so rarely not. We want to further conversations on failure as a continuous, present possibility within community literacy because this feels like a reality that is hardly acknowledged. Rather than offer platitudes of concrete successes to come after failure, we see community literacy as an uncomposed reciprocal process, one constantly bouncing through longitudes and latitudes of potential failure.

Though we also understand the notion of *who gets to fail* is shaped by whiteness, Hull, Shelton, and Mckoy (2019) have argued about their experiences as Black women in academic spaces: "Because minority bodies are always, already under scrutiny and subject to explanation and qualification, they are often conditioned to be aware of and responsive to the presumed standards of professionalism just to survive." While we feel different forms of judgment as white queercrip scholars, we avoid the same scrutiny experienced by our colleagues of color, and we acknowledge whiteness as part of what enables us to make failure a generative space in ways where colleagues of color may be disproportionately scrutinized or punished for failure, a site of racial oppression within academia we don't mean to erase.

In understanding our white queercrip experiences as failure as generative, we point to our semester-to-semester, often-shifting relationship with a nonprofit dedicated to after school programming for middle school-aged children that demonstrated the need for constant revision. After both the initial WLI member who had forged the relationship with the site director graduated and, shortly thereafter, the site director we had developed a

relationship with moved on as well, we found we were constantly revising/reevaluating what this program would look like. In the end, the partnership collapsed for many reasons, some related to the constraints of time and energy Keshia and Ada had, others related to goals the nonprofit had that we simply did not have the resources to fulfill. Over our 8-year relationship with this center, we offered literacy programming twice a week, writing with hundreds of young writers over the program's lifespan, until the organization found a better-resourced partner that could better respond to their goals.

Another space where we saw failure acting in generative ways, in being uncomposed yet reciprocal at the same time, was within our LGBTQ+ Writing Club. Looking back, we were too optimistic about the potential involvement in this project and, though we went above and beyond in trying to make it an accessible productive space for all involved or potentially involved, it was not the time nor space for this niche form of programming to most succeed. However, we conform to the beliefs argued by Kim Q. Hall (2014) arguing that "because queers do not conform to norms of identity, success, maturity, or having a life, queers are failures, and our failure promises to open, new directions in queer theory, communities, and lives" (212). The LGBTQ+ Writing Club was undeniably a failure, but because we refuse to abide by institutional norms of what success looks like, we see our LGBTQ+ Writing Club as failure only in that it was queerly uncomposed, and within this unrepresentable queerness there was potential for new models of thinking through *queerly doing* community literacy work. Even if community literacy work on the subject of queerness did not meet the wants and needs of that time, we can still use the promise of its failure as a generative force for what WLI can be.

Failure as Relational: Creating Space for Ethical, Meaningful Short-Term Partnerships

Closely related to failure being generative is how relationship building—even relationship building that ultimately *ends*—is still important and necessary community literacy work. While our embodied experiences of these partnerships coming to a close were felt as failure and were often perceived by our institution as failure, we reflect on how these relationships were meaningful to both WLI volunteers *as well as* our community partners, nonetheless. We call for a more queer, more disabled reading of relationships.

While from an institutional perspective, our bodies may be read as "unreliable" (Pereira, 2021), it was through queercrip embodiment that we were able to make these connections. Our unstable bodyminds are the only ones we have, and through them we delicately built relationships with others. Along with attention to how queercrip embodiment shapes how we experience failure as generative, we turn our attention to the process of relationship building that is often at the center of community-engaged work. As these relationships were being built, we realized that some of these relationships weren't meant to last and that longevity does not determine the quality or meaning of the relationship. Here, we draw on queer polyamorous perspectives to decenter more traditional cisheteropatriarchal notions of relationships. As Trahan (2014) notes, "talking about polyamory in all the various ways it can be talked about—as an identity, a theory, a social movement, a lovestyle—will help us expand our understanding of not only queer relationships, but human relationships and connections more broadly and how these are discursively constructed through

intentional language use" (5). We see potential in valuing the short-lived nature of these "failed" partnerships, especially in understanding that our queercrip bodies often demand such *queer temporalities* (see Halbertstam, 2005). Queer polyamorous perspectives draw on flexibility, movement, and ever shifting paradigms of intimacy, which carry utility and merit regardless of length or shape. As Hammack, Frost, and Hughes (2018) offer, "the nature and meaning of relational forms shifts across time and place" (28). In asserting that even our most short-lived partnerships matter, we reject the perceived failure of these partnerships.

We refuse to see these short-lived partnerships as failures *because they were not failures*. We were able to be supportive to these organizations for a time, but sometimes we weren't a great fit in the long term. In this sense, failure in relationship building helped us identify what we needed, and these temporary configurations also served as a springboard assisting community partners identify their long-term goals and needs. Relationships do not have to be long lived to be meaningful or ethical. Of course, and as many other community literacy practitioners have argued, university power dynamics must be ethically tended to (for example, see Mathieu 2005; Shah 2020). As Ada (Hubrig 2022) has argued in relation to the academic watering-down of disability justice, marginalized people and marginalized communities "are talked about, too-often without our own input, and targeted by extractive academic practices. Too-many academics have a nasty tendency to extract from marginalized communities." To avoid being extractive, community partnerships should take their cues from the communities we work in and alongside, including the desired *length* of the partnership.

And we also recognize that community-engaged literacy work is not an end-all, be-all solution to overarching systemic issues. Ada's

program, for example, working closely with unhoused writers was always going to be unsustainable and didn't address the root causes of homelessness, white supremacy, and poverty. But those relationships—relationships that continued long after the program itself ended—were still meaningful. Though the more nebulous configuration the project took on wasn't something that fit nicely into a semester calendar or a CV line doesn't mean it was any less successful: the relationship building that makes meaningful community literacy possible often exists outside of tidy institutional boxes.

Queercrip relationship building can be messy, and neither community engagement nor the needs of our queercrip bodyminds fit nicely into semester calendars or course objectives. We argue that our own experiences as queercrip students put us *already outside* the realm of what is institutionally and professionally "acceptable," and we feel acutely the pressures to over-perform.

"Failure" as a matter of perspective: Decentering University Agendas

Finally, in reflecting on our embodied experiences of failure, we recognize that what we felt as "failure" often came from specific pressures: pressure to want to do right by our community partners, pressure to want to do right by those who came before us in WLI, and also pressure to "succeed" in ways recognizable to our institution because of the constraints of graduate school and academia more generally.

Along the backdrop of such pressures, we note that community literacy partnerships are often precarious, with many community literacy programs living just on the very precipice of failure. They

rely on steady amicable relationships between institutions and community partners, consistent funding and/or labor, and, more recently, the ability to adapt and sustain themselves within the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. At any given moment, even a small fault within any of these aspects of community partnerships or any other aspects not mentioned can lead to a total loss of that partnership, a result that many would deem a failure. From our own positions, leading WLI as queercrip graduate students, we believe these failures are failures of the *institutional* variety: failures to meet quantifiable benchmarks that can be used as intellectual currency or public relations campaigns by the university.

We point to what Paula Mathieu (2005) has called "the dangerous tendency to use rather than to help" in university-sponsored community literacy efforts (117). Mathieu parses how "the desire to engage the civic responsibility of the teacher/writer/scholar can be undermined or turned into an exploitative situation when such desires are spurred or reshaped by the institutional paradigms that define the work life of an academic in terms of research, teaching, and service" (120), referring to this reshaping of desires as "institutionalizing and professionalizing pressures" (121). We do not see these queercrip identities as failures defined by lack, rather we see them as resistive to capitalist notions that failure is always a dynamic of winners vs. losers or that we must mythologize failure as an excuse to try, try, and try again. Rather, we embrace "failure as a way of refusing to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline and as a form of critique," proudly claiming queercrip identities as practice of "quietly los[ing], and in losing, it imagines other goals for life, for love, for art, and for being" (Halberstam 2011, 88). In short, by embracing and understanding the perceived failures of our queercrip identities, we make use of failure both as a way of understanding, embracing, and knowing what "losing" means and how to live within that failure. This can be especially

useful for community literacy partnerships because, whether we want to admit it or not, many community literacy programs dwell within failure in much of the same way.

Despite our belief that community literacy programs live steadily within the realm of potential failure, scholars rarely write on failed community literacy programs, keynote speakers do not advocate for failing, and resources of funding do not care about resistive embrace of failing queercrip identities. The message is clear—failure is not a plausible nor productive option. Stacey Waite (2019) argues this is, of course, "always the trick of systematic powers of operation; we might want to resist but find our resistance ridden with too much risk" (49). An embrace of our queercrip identities and an argument toward community literacy programs as a constant uncomposed is a risk, one that often puts us in opposition to the systems in which we work. But the systematic constraints of the risk offer a cogent reflection of another type of failure. The majority of community literacy programs work within the institutional boundaries and hierarchies that often hinder their potential, an especially true reality for marginalized organizers. Even as we embrace the failures of our queercrip identities and argue that they uniquely position us to tackle the failures of community literacy work, we also want to acknowledge the ways we have been failed in return.

Of course, we did the work because we loved the work, despite these limitations. As our colleague and former WLI coordinator Ashanka Kumari (2020) reflected on her experiences with the program, "this work typically needs institutional support to thrive" (126). We both see community literacy as critically important work, but we also believe this work is often made more difficult by the institutional and hierarchical systems that run it and the

expectation of facilitators and organizers to shoulder the burden of so much more than they should have to.

In our own experiences as marginalized queercrip graduate student organizers, we faced a number of challenges. WLI was run primarily by graduate students without compensation for that labor. While for a short time, a single member of WLI (typically, the acting director) was previously given course release during the spring semester, this has since been removed with COVID-19 associated budget and labor cuts. Additionally, while UNL offers health insurance plans for graduate students, those plans are hardly comprehensive. During Ada's previous time at UNL (on and off between 2011-2020), student insurance could not meet the demand of medical costs associated with their Crohn's disease, leaving them to seek other insurance and with medical debt they are still paying off. Graduate students were also limited to only three counseling sessions per semester. During Keshia's time at UNL (2017 to ongoing), UNL has since expanded their counseling services so that students may go to as many times as they please, but these services are limited in their capacity to provide needed anxiety and depression medication and often involve strenuous and difficult arrangements of appointments, specific counselors, etc. Additionally, these counseling services were largely suspended during the COVID-19 pandemic and have returned now only in a limited capacity. As individuals with bodyminds with specific medical and mental needs, it was especially difficult to navigate the difficulties of the healthcare system and UNL's limited health insurance coverage. Add this to the usual precarity of position and labor that comes with being a graduate student and it is a potent mess, one that made and continues to make it especially hard to run a consistently successful and sustainable community literacy program.

We frequently felt as if our university colleagues across institutional contexts were ready to "use" our partnerships without discussion with us what those partnerships—the relationships, our shared literacy goals, our actual capacity at those sites—looked like. One related issue we ran into was having several undergraduate "volunteers" being sent to several of these sites, often to fulfill a "service learning" requirement for an honors course. While on some occasions, these undergraduate volunteers became thoughtful engaged members of WLI, often WLI site leaders were frustrated that we not only were engaged in literacy efforts at these sites but were expected to field an uneven influx of undergraduate volunteers from a university-driven program for which we had no input. On more than one occasion, undergraduate students we had never met would come to our campus offices to demand we sign their service-learning forms. When we approached this office to ask them to stop giving out our information, it was treated institutionally as a failure, with university partners commenting that training undergraduates to do this work was part of our job. This of course overlooked the fact that *none of this* was our "job," that we were not being paid to do this labor or to supervise undergraduate volunteers.

Many of our experiences in community literacy mirror these conversations with university administrators: across contexts, our labor was often deemed an institutional failure because it didn't neatly adhere to university goals, such as Ada's work at the shelter for unhoused men, designed to help them begin community college employment programs self-selected by the unhoused writers themselves. When one writer decided that college was not the best option for him, Ada supported that decision. As a result, the pilot program was "under-enrolled" according to community college paperwork, and Ada (at the time an adjunct) could not be reimbursed for any of the materials an internal grant through the

college was meant to cover. While this program did help three unhoused writers begin a college education with stable employment, as well as connected these writers to other resources including counseling and community college support services, it was deemed a failure by the institution because it did not meet the institutional expectations of the college. Through our own embodied experiences leading a community literacy program, we contend that university agendas dictate too much of what is categorized—–and experienced—as "failure" in community-engaged writing programs, divorced from the actual on-the-ground reality of the work, reinscribing white, cisheteropatriachal, ableist academic standards and normativities.

Coda: Embracing Queercrip Failure

We began this article with stories of embodied queercrip failure, choosing to center how our own experiences as white, queer, disabled community literacy scholars has shaped our understanding of failure (and, by extension, success) in community work and highlight how institutional biases and status quo framing of this work fails *us*. As Cedillo (2018) has argued, "Living in a body that contests the status quo is an unrelenting process; it is indeed exhausting. Normative standards and classifications must move over and make room for the rest of us." We write from our embodied experiences to push those normative standards aside, to make room for other multiply marginalized scholars who want similar opportunities to do this work, but who are pushed out of academic spaces.

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