

**'Bodily encounters': non-sovereign freedom and disability**

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Ashley Biser  
Associate Professor  
Ohio Wesleyan University  
anbiser@owu.edu

Prepared for delivery at the  
2017 Annual Meeting of the  
Western Political Science Association  
April 14, 2017

to walk means to fall  
to thrust forward

*to fall and catch*

the seemingly random  
in its own system of gestures

based on a series of neat errors  
*falling and catching*

to thrust forward

sometimes the body misses  
then collapses

sometimes  
it shatters

with this particular knowledge

a movement spastic  
and unwieldy  
is its own lyric and  
the able-bodied are

tone-deaf to this singing

-Jennifer Bartlett, poems from *Autobiography*<sup>i</sup>

In “Bodies in Action: Corporeal Agency and Democratic Politics,” Sharon Krause<sup>ii</sup> argues that theorists like Diana Coole, Samantha Frost, and Jane Bennett offer important correctives to the assumptions of autonomy that undergird liberal individualism. Insofar as “new materialists” emphasize the embodied nature of human agency, Krause appreciates their attempts to understand agency as the interaction between human bodies and their material environments and recognizes how this approach could heighten “awareness of how we materially enact domination and oppression, often without meaning to do so.”<sup>iii</sup> But despite her appreciation of new materialist attempts to reframe agency as more than

individual control and choice, Krause ultimately believes that new materialist accounts fail to preserve the distinctive qualities of *political* agency. Absent a more robust account of personal responsibility and subjectivity, Krause believes that embodied accounts of agency “cannot sustain a model of agency that is viable for democratic politics.”<sup>iv</sup>

In *Freedom Beyond Sovereignty: Reconstructing Liberal Individualism*, Krause’s book-length exploration of what she terms “non-sovereign agency,” she again argues that an emphasis on “bodies in action” is critical to democracy. In this work, the political stakes of Krause’s argument are front and center. She explicitly states that “the sovereigntist ideal of agency [can be used to] justify the privileged in an unconscionably narrow sense of responsibility . . . [and can] exacerbate existing inequalities.”<sup>v</sup> Unless we understand agency as non-sovereign, Krause argues, we will be unable to confront inequalities based on race, gender, and sexual orientation.

In opposition to traditional assumptions of liberalism, Krause defines agency as “an emergent property” and “an assemblage of the communicative exchanges, background meanings, social interpretations, personal intentions, self-understandings, and even bodily encounters through which one’s identity finds affirmation in one’s deeds.”<sup>vi</sup> Although she believes that an agent should be able to recognize herself in her actions, Krause refuses an understanding of agency that implies complete control or total intentionality. Oftentimes, we have little control over how our actions manifest in a world of other human beings (and things) and frequently our actions have effects that we do not intend.<sup>vii</sup> Through her concept of non-sovereign agency, Krause provides a way to think about how we can still assign responsibility for political outcomes—even if they are beyond the control of any single individual. Throughout the book, she highlights our collective responsibility for structural inequalities—never letting us off the hook for our (hopefully unintentional) participation in

social structures that oppress. In refiguring our conceptions of agency, Krause maintains that we can develop a “redeemed” understanding of freedom—one that is attention to interdependence, intersubjectivity, corporeal reality, and inequality. Her hope is that non-sovereign agency might offer a “redemption that finds new meanings in freedom, that shines light on previously unseen harms, and that enables us to inhabit our freedom in ways that extend it more fully to others.”<sup>viii</sup>

Although Krause’s nuanced account of non-sovereign agency specifically references “bodily encounters” as part of the “assemblage” that constitutes agency, she rarely references a body that is anything other than able. In her 2011 piece, there is quick mention of the “bad knees I was born with that have never been right,”<sup>ix</sup> but the bodies Krause discusses rarely fall, collapse, or shatter. They certainly do not move spastically; nor are they particularly unwieldy. Occasionally, bodies are infected with AIDS<sup>x</sup> or misaligned with one’s gender identity;<sup>xi</sup> frequently, they are pained and distorted by the expectations of an oppressive society.<sup>xii</sup> But bodies by Krause’s account are never disabled. Despite Krause’s attention to issues of race, gender, and sexuality, she curiously sidesteps inequalities based on ability, suggesting at times that discrimination against those who are disabled is an individual misfortune rather than a structural injustice.<sup>xiii</sup>

In this essay, I argue that Krause’s discomfort with questions of ability is surprising, given her appreciation for the physicality of agency, but ultimately tied to her emphasis on responsibility as a key component of political agency. How, I ask, can we retain Krause’s admirable commitment to a democratic politics that resists structural inequality and prizes action while nonetheless recognizing the agency of those who are differently-abled?<sup>xiv</sup>

Although Krause sees herself as moving beyond Hannah Arendt’s conception of non-sovereign freedom, I suggest that Arendt’s emphasis on action as deeply conditioned yet

never fully constrained provides a unexplored basis for understanding the agency exercised by those who are differently-abled.

The following essay is broken into five parts. In the first, I explore new materialism and the understanding of agency developed in key works, such as Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter* and the essays in Diana Coole and Samantha Frost's anthology on *New Materialisms*. The next section turns to Krause's attempt to find a middle ground between the radical expansion of subjectivity pushed for by new materialists and the narrow version of sovereign agency assumed by liberalism. I then turn to Krause's discussion (or lack thereof) of disability—showing the potential for affinity between disability critiques of liberalism and Krause's understanding of non-sovereign agency. Ultimately, however, I argue in the fourth section that it may be impossible for Krause to simply include disability as an additional category of inequity because she does not conceptualize disabled people as a social group and is still too tied to a unified understanding of selfhood. Instead of returning to new materialists, however, I conclude with a brief discussion of Arendt's understanding of freedom as action *in spite of* restraint. I argue that despite Arendt's own mistrust of the body, her work nonetheless provides fertile ground for a conception of agency that is still materialist and socially distributed, but ultimately capable of conceptualizing disabled persons as political actors.

## I. BODIES AS ACTANTS: NEW MATERIALIST UNDERSTANDINGS OF AGENCY

Krause's understanding of non-sovereign agency is heavily influenced by her readings of authors like Jane Bennett, Samantha Frost, and Diane Coole. In *Vibrant Matter: a political ecology of things*, Jane Bennett emphasizes the agency of things, arguing that we need a new understanding of how material entities function to shape human reality. Instead of talking about objects, Bennett understands things as “actants” – a term borrowed from

Bruno Latour to name a “source of action that can be either human or nonhuman.”<sup>xxv</sup> As she puts it an actant is “that which has efficacy, can *do* things, has sufficient coherence to make a difference, produce effects, alter the course of events.”<sup>xxvi</sup> Bennett argues that actants can be both organic and inorganic, living and deceased. From dead rats to plastic bottle caps to polycrystalline metal, Bennett pushes her readers to recognize the “vitality” inherent in these seemingly inert objects.

This emphasis on “thing-power” recurs in Diana Coole and Samantha Frost’s anthology, *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*. In their introduction, Coole and Frost argue that new materialists “compel us ... to recognize that phenomena are caught in a multitude of interlocking systems and forces and to consider anew the location and nature of capacities for agency.”<sup>xxvii</sup> Understood as a reaction to the inadequacies of the ‘cultural turn’ that has for many years dominated much of political theory, new materialism is both a methodological and epistemological “reorientation” that involves more than just a (re)focus on the force of things; it is “posthuman,” “critical,” and “multimodal.”<sup>xxviii</sup> According to Coole and Frost, new materialists revive the insights of classical materialists like Marx, insofar as they emphasize “practical, politically engaged social theory, devoted to the critical analysis of actual conditions of existence and their inherent inequality;”<sup>xxix</sup> at the same time, these are *new* materialisms, which move beyond classical varieties, particularly as they resist an anthropocentric bias.<sup>xx</sup>

For the eclectic group of scholars who loosely consider themselves new materialists, the recognition of multiple sites of agency has an ethical import as well. How, they ask, might our relationship with the world change, if we were to recognize things as co-participants in a shared materiality, instead of as mere objects? How, Bennett asks, “would patterns of consumption change if we faced not litter, rubbish, trash or “the recycling,” but

an accumulating pile of lively and potentially dangerous matter?”<sup>xxxi</sup> At the heart of new materialist engagements with a world of “lively things” is the hope that a new understanding of materiality will encourage a shift in comportment that will enable human beings to more justly interact with our many environments.

Even moreso than Bennet’s work, the essays in Coole and Frost’s volume emphasize the corporeal nature of action and the physicality of the bodies that engage in it. Take, for example, Melissa Orlie’s essay “Impersonal Matter.”<sup>xxxi</sup> In her re-reading of Nietzsche, Orlie highlights the extent to which Nietzsche understands the will as arising from “multiple drives . . . [each of which] seeks to become master; to remake the world according to the needs and health of the body as it interprets them.”<sup>xxxi</sup> The body in Orlie’s reading constitutes a multiplicity of forces that often conspire to frustrate our “fantasy” of sovereignty.<sup>xxiv</sup> Ultimately, she argues, we are unaware of “the extent to which our daily lives are composed of endless and ultimately fruitless measures to remain aware of the body’s vulnerability.”<sup>xxv</sup> Rather than seeking mastery of these drives and one’s body—the goal of the liberal sovereign self—Orlie suggests that our challenge is to “rank order” the drives that constitute us.<sup>xxvi</sup> Freedom can thus be found “in actions which show whether and how we are creative or mere creatures of the conditions from which we arise.”<sup>xxvii</sup>

Like Orlie, Sonia Kruks also sees the “facticities of one’s organic body”<sup>xxviii</sup> as inescapable features of a human life that both constrain and construct our experiences of selfhood. Through her reading of Simone de Beauvoir on both gender and old age, Kruks argues that our bodies (particularly women’s bodies in her essay) are experienced as “life-structuring realities”<sup>xxix</sup> that make possible certain actions and preclude others. Because many bodies do not conform to predominant norms, our bodies, she suggests, also locate us as members of social groups, calling our awareness to structural inequality. Via Kruks’s

interpretation of de Beauvoir, “to ‘become a woman’ is to be involuntarily located in various social structures and, through their mediations, to be implicated in serial relations that one has not chosen and yet which one still participates in perpetuating.”<sup>xxx</sup>

## II. KRAUSE ON NON-SOVEREIGN AGENCY

Although she does not specifically reference Kruks’s work in her monograph, Krause, too, understands that “bodies (both human and inhuman) have a part in agency” and that we can be “implicated” in social relations beyond our control(\*). According to Krause, the premise of sovereign agency—rooted in the illusion of autonomy—is not only factually incorrect, but also politically problematic. In developing her own understanding of *non*-sovereign agency, Krause draws on Samantha Frost’s work, which emphasizes the “distinctive subjectivities that characterize individual human beings [and] arise over time through complex chains of perceptions together with the thoughts, memories, habits, and desires they generate.”<sup>xxxii</sup> Krause also turns to Diana Coole’s concept of ‘corporeal communicators’—those unintentional gestures that often expose that which we would prefer to keep hidden. Insofar as our subjectivity is constituted through “enfleshed memories” and our bodies’ unintentional movements reflect something about our identity, Krause argues that agency cannot be understood as independent from bodily necessity.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Instead of seeing the body as simply a tool of the will (something to be mastered by an autonomous subject), Krause again borrows from Coole to describe the body as “agentic-expressive.” Via this understanding, the body itself takes on agentic qualities, able to communicate and act, and our experiences of our bodies help to constitute our own self-identity.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Rather than seeing this interdependency as undermining political agency, Krause seeks to reconcile the corporeal character of agency with a robust conception of freedom.

In addition to grounding agency in the human body, Krause also maintains that non-sovereign agents require the complicity of multiple actors both to be effective and to create meaning. Drawing on Hannah Arendt's *Human Condition* and her essay on freedom, Krause argues that Arendt is one of the first to show this "social distribution of agency."<sup>xxxiv</sup> By this, Krause refers to Arendt's insistence that, as human beings "whose essence is beginning," we continually insert ourselves into what Arendt terms the "web of human relationships."<sup>xxxv</sup> Because we are incapable of controlling the effects of our actions, action is, via Arendt's account, both unpredictable and boundless. As such, Krause argues "[o]ther people are needed as 'co-actors' who participate with the agent in the 'actual achievement of her 'enterprise' or objective";<sup>xxxvi</sup> agency is thus 'distributed' among different actors. With Arendt, Krause maintains that the necessity of 'co-actors' need not compromise our ability to act or to experience freedom.

Although appreciative of both new materialists' emphasis on the body and Arendt's understanding of agency as socially distributed, Krause maintains that neither approach offers an account of selfhood suitable to democratic politics. Via Krause's critique, new materialists extend the category of actants too far: "not every movement of the body constitutes an instance of agency," she reminds her readers.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Nor, she is clear, do inanimate objects have the "reflexive sense of self required for the affirmation of one's subjective existence through action in the world."<sup>xxxviii</sup> For Krause, the ability to both see oneself and be seen in one's deeds is critical to any understanding of agency, because absent a coherent self, she argues, it becomes impossible to "hold ourselves accountable for the damage we have done and the good we ought to do."<sup>xxxix</sup> Although Krause shies away from the assumption that the self is an "*a priori* essence," highlighting its "plural, open-ended

quality” (Krause 2015, 22), she ultimately believes that humans are more “distinctive” actants than Bennett and the new materialists would have us believe.<sup>xi</sup>

Krause is also unwilling to accept Arendt’s more performative understanding of identity. Krause criticizes Arendt’s conception of identity as “too fluid and shapeless.”<sup>xii</sup> Because Arendt believes that an actor’s identity—“who” they are—only becomes apparent in the action itself, Krause argues that she has no way to account for patterns of behavior or a stable selfhood that extends beyond a single act. This ephemeral quality of Arendtian identity is, for Krause, deeply disturbing. For her, “[h]uman agency makes sense only in the context of action that affirms a particular, enduring self. It is the existence of this self that gives the agent something to disclose and gives others something to recognize and take up.”<sup>xiii</sup> In the end, Krause believes that a sense of selfhood is fundamental to any conception of political agency—both because it allows us to think about personal responsibility and because it enables human beings to react and respond to norms of right and wrong.<sup>xiii</sup> While a self can certainly be constrained by the body and subject to the actions of others, Krause nonetheless sees it as a necessary precondition to political agency.

Krause’s emphasis on political responsibility is evident in both her earlier article and the monograph. But in her later work, it takes on a critical role in her overarching argument about the potential of non-sovereign agency to confront structural inequalities. Unlike accounts of responsibility that rest on the concept of liability, Krause argues that responsibility is better understood in terms of culpability, accountability, and responsiveness to norms.<sup>xiv</sup> Contrary to the dichotomous nature of liability (you are either liable or not), the concept of culpability allows for varying degrees of responsibility and can be helpful in understanding how members of oppressed groups sometimes participate in their own oppression.<sup>xiv</sup> Krause underscores this point with the example of gansta rappers: under a

liability model of political responsibility, the answer as to whether we should hold gansta rappers responsible for their participation in a culture that degrades women and prizes materialism is either yes or no. No matter which we choose, Krause argues that we miss important elements of the co-creation of a gansta rapper's identity. She contends that via an understanding of non-sovereign agency, we can hold gansta rappers culpable for the elements of their music that degrade while still recognizing "that their intentions and effects are mediated in distorting ways by social inequality."<sup>xlvi</sup>

Even when our actions are unintentional, Krause maintains, we can hold our future selves accountable for "remediat[ing] the harms we have helped to generate."<sup>xlvii</sup> Unlike responsibility as culpability, which centers on past actions, Krause contends that responsibility as accountability "[asks] me to help change the present and the future."<sup>xlviii</sup> On this view, Krause argues that we become "mutually implicated in injustice and mutually called to be the bearers of one another's agency."<sup>xliv</sup>

Krause also maintains that responsibility sometimes involves responsiveness to norms or "our ability to be moved by a sense of right."<sup>1</sup> Using the example of James Baldwin, whose writings, Krause believes, show "urgent responsiveness to what he knows is true and just," she suggests that responsibility as responsiveness has the potential to inspire action that fundamentally transforms social relations and can be a "powerful friend of freedom."<sup>li</sup>

### III. DIS-ABLING AGENCY

Despite the admirable attention Krause gives to social inequalities based on race, gender, and sexuality, one form of social inequality fails to register in her work. Aside from the aforementioned reference to her bad knees and another to mental illness,<sup>lii</sup> Krause omits any mention of those who are disabled. On one hand, this omission is hardly surprising. As Barbara Arneil has cataloged, modern political theory has a troubled history with disability—

relying heavily on “the binary of the autonomous, rational and industrious citizen *versus* the dependent, ‘irrational’ and/or ‘idle’ other.”<sup>liii</sup> Both liberalism and republicanism, Arneil contends, are premised on the exclusion of disabled persons from “the meanings of personhood and citizenship” and their foundational texts are littered with negative images of those who do not fit our definitions of “normality.”<sup>liv</sup> Insofar as Krause remains committed to liberal individualism as the primary means by which we should understand political rights and responsibilities, her omission of any reference to disability is fully in keeping with the approach of her liberal intellectual ancestors.

However, there is little discussion in *Freedom Beyond Sovereignty* of the social contract theorists Arneil criticizes.<sup>lv</sup> Far from developing her understanding of selfhood in opposition to those who are “incapacitated” and in need of charity (as Locke does) or insisting (à la Kant) that “those who are not rational are by definition not ‘autonomous’ and strictly speaking not ‘persons,’”<sup>lvi</sup> Krause’s nuanced account of non-sovereign agency explicitly counters assumptions of autonomy. The self Krause articulates is interdependent, passionate, intersubjective, and material—a far cry from the “autonomous, rational and industrious citizen” decried by Arneil. As such, it would seem that Krause’s work could be easily extrapolated to cover structural inequalities on the basis of disability.<sup>lvii</sup>

Take, for example, her emphasis on the physicality of selfhood. Krause acknowledges that our bodies sometimes act contrary to our intentions and seem to have lives of their own. She also recognizes that our experiences of our bodies are critical to how we develop our own selfhood. On the surface, then, Krause’s description would seem to accord well with the experiences of those with disabilities. The body in Jennifer Bartlett’s poem, which lurches forward in its unwieldy walking lyric, would seem a perfect example of

an actant that is only partially within our control but nonetheless central to our self-understandings.

In Sheila Black's poem, "What You Mourn," she eloquently describes the mismatch between her own experience of her body and the labels ascribed by "outsiders":

none of whom could imagine  
that the crooked body they spoke of,  
the body, which made walking difficult  
and running practically impossible,  
except as a kind of dance, a sideways looping  
like someone about to fall . . .  
that body they tried so hard to fix, straighten, was simply mine,  
and I loved it as you love your own country<sup>lviii</sup>

Black's experience of seeing her body as integral to her personhood and coming to love it despite its negative characterization by others mirrors closely Krause's account of the selfhood developed by people with "nontraditional physical experiences"—i.e. those whose bodies do not act according to societal expectations.<sup>lix</sup> With deference to Judith Butler, Krause is able to recognize this experience insofar as it affects those who are gay, lesbian, or transgender. Indeed, Krause not only believes that this physical experience of selfhood has profound effects on our self-understandings, but that it might contain within it transformational political potential: she explicitly references the "critical consciousness that can arise from the experience of a body that fails to 'materialize' in accordance with prevailing gender norms."<sup>lx</sup> It would seem, therefore, that a body that "fails to materialize in accordance with prevailing norms" of *ability* might contain similar political potency.

But Krause never makes that leap. In her 2011 article, Krause does make reference to a physical ailment that has plagued her since her childhood, her aforementioned "bad knees." In the context of defending her understanding of selfhood as a "relatively unified"

subjectivity” that is nonetheless dynamic and comprised of an ongoing relationship between our physical and human environments, Krause says the following:

“Even our most intransigent physical qualities—the bad knees I was born with that have never been right— take on shifting significance for who we are as our lives unfold, because how these qualities figure in the constitution of our subjectivity depends partly on how the social and material contexts shape our experience of them.”<sup>lxi</sup>

In this example, Krause acknowledges that a physical impairment has significance for her personal identity. She also recognizes that her experience of this impairment is mediated by her material and social contexts. And (presumably) this impairment does not compromise her ability to act as a political agent. While her knees are not a part of her *political* identity, Krause nonetheless understands them as a part of her own materialization as a non-sovereign agent.

But this example is missing from the later *Freedom beyond Sovereignty*. In this text, Krause makes few references to physical constraints (aside from a brief discussion of the physicality of oppression in Fanon’s work).<sup>lxii</sup> She does, however, mention mental illness. Although brief, her comments about mental illness expose problematic assumptions about disability and highlight the limitations of Krause’s understanding of non-sovereign agency.

#### IV. NEITHER SYSTEMATIC NOR UNJUST: INEQUALITIES ON THE BASIS OF ABILITY

Krause’s reference to mental illness occurs in the initial pages of her chapter on responsibility, as she attempts to differentiate those inequalities that she will discuss from those she will not. In this section, she states that her “emphasis is on inequalities that are both systematic and unjust in that they affect whole categories of persons in ways that contravene liberal democracy’s commitment to equal respect and reciprocity.”<sup>lxiii</sup> Although other inequalities exist, she focuses on the inequalities of race, gender, and sexual

orientation, because they involve “social standing and status,” “privilege and exclusion,” “domination and oppression” and persist despite the accordance of formal rights.<sup>lxiv</sup>

On the surface, it would appear that inequality on the basis of disability would fit all of these criteria. As numerous scholars of disability have documented, those who are disabled form a social category of persons who are systematically excluded from a society that privileges the able-bodied. Despite formal protections, like the Americans with Disabilities Act and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, people with disabilities face discrimination in school, at the workplace, and in politics. In his essay on “The Dimensions of Disability Oppression,” James Charlton argues that “the logic of disability oppression closely parallels the oppression of other groups. It is a logic bound up with political-economic needs and belief systems of domination.”<sup>lxv</sup> As such, he baldly states, people with disabilities are “poor, powerless and degraded.”<sup>lxvi</sup> In short, it appears that people with disabilities, like people of color, women, and members of the queer community, are often treated without the respect and reciprocity central to a liberal democracy.

Instead of recognizing these parallels, however, Krause explicitly excludes the inequalities faced by those with mental illness from consideration. For her, a person with a severe mental illness may be incapable of recognizing herself in her actions and is thus unable to maintain the stable sense of self that Krause views as central to political responsibility and agency. In this sense, agency is “jeopardized.” In Krause’s words: “when agency is compromised in these ways it is unfortunate for the individual involved, but it is not a matter of injustice and not something that democratic states and citizens have a political obligation to remediate.”<sup>lxvii</sup> Rather than a systematic form of inequality, Krause interprets inequality on the basis of (mental) impairment as a “random” occurrence to be greeted with pity but not resistance.

It would be unfair to extrapolate from this brief statement, made almost in passing, a fully-formed theory of disability. Absent explicit discussion of persons with disabilities, we cannot know what Krause might say about those with physical disabilities or less severe forms of mental illness. But the comment does suggest that Krause may be unable to recognize the injustice faced by those with mental illness because she interprets it as “random” rather than systemic and afflicting individuals rather than groups. Both assumptions have been challenged by scholars of disability, and neither fits easily with her own model of non-sovereign agency.

This first assumption—that the challenges faced by people with disabilities are individual challenges born of individual defects—is typical of what has come to be known as the “medical model of disability.” In opposition to this model, which often relies on a problematic notions of deviance and normalcy, disability scholars have developed a “social model of disability,” which asserts that the difficulties faced by people with disabilities are created by an environment built to privilege the able-bodied.<sup>lxviii</sup> Via this model, “social relations, the built environment, laws and practices are structure and organized [so that] certain bodies are hindered and made to be disabled, while other bodies are supported and facilitated.”<sup>lxix</sup> While more recent scholarship has criticized the extreme version of social constructivism as ignoring the real pain and limitations faced by those with disabilities,<sup>lxx</sup> the emphasis on how the built environment produces disability would seem to suggest that inequalities based on ability are very much systematic, akin to those outlined elsewhere in Krause’s work.

The second assumption—that disability is individuated, rather than attending a specific social group— is also easily refuted. A prime example is the Deaf community. A tightly-knit community, comprised of members fluent in American Sign Language, the Deaf

community has long held that its culture is equally as rich as that of hearing persons. A visual language, with its own syntax and history, American Sign Language has given rise to its own style of artistic expression and norms of behavior. As such, its use has become increasingly associated with a sense of Deaf pride. Instead of seeing themselves as disabled, members of the Deaf (with a capital D) community see themselves as participants in a rich and complex linguistic community. In his essay, “Construction of Deafness,” Harlan Lane shows how some Deaf individuals understand their deafness as constitutive of their distinctive selfhood—rather than as a barrier to be overcome.<sup>lxxi</sup> Any inequalities faced by Deaf individuals, they argue, are a result of a society that does not understand their language—not their own inability to hear. Like the misgendered bodies to which Krause draws our attention, Deaf persons also articulate a mismatch between their self-understandings and those imposed by a hearing society. But also like the queer community, the Deaf have developed political power *through* their shared physical experience of deafness.<sup>lxxii</sup>

Admittedly, the Deaf community is an easy example; the shared language of ASL provides a sense of unity that cannot always be extrapolated to the broader community of those who are disabled. However, as the social model of disability insists, people who are disabled share the experience of having their physicality frustrated by a material environment that does not suit their needs. But this should not prevent persons with disabilities from being agents or us from recognizing structural inequalities on the basis of disability. According to Krause’s earlier articulation of non-sovereign agency, this interaction between the physical world and one’s own selfhood is experienced by all actors—able-bodied or not. More importantly, the experience of having one’s intentions and actions frustrated by our social environment does not preclude agency.

Why, then, is Krause unable to extend the generosity of her interpretation of non-sovereign agency to someone with a severe mental illness? The answer to this question lies in Krause's desire for a sense of a unified selfhood. It is the inability of a person with severe mental illness to see herself reflected in her deeds that results in her exclusion from the range of inequalities with which Krause concerns herself. In the next section, I ask what might happen to our understanding of non-sovereign agency if we were less concerned with a stable self.

## V. ACTIVITY NOT STATUS: ARENDT ON NON-SOVEREIGN AGENCY

To answer this question, I turn back to a theorist from whom Krause distances herself from early on in *Freedom Beyond Sovereignty*. Contra Krause, I argue that Arendt's "fluid and shapeless" understanding of identity is actually a benefit to those interested in including disabled persons in a conception of non-sovereign agency. Because she emphasizes freedom as an ephemeral experience, she is less concerned with the status of agents than with their activity. As such, her work might contain possibilities for those thinkers interested how we might conceptualize disability in the context of non-sovereign agency.

I am not the first to make the claim that Arendt's work might be fruitful for theorists of disability. Lorraine Krall McCrary, too, argues that Arendt's work is an unexplored resource for those interested in disability.<sup>lxxiii</sup> For her, however, the promise of Arendt's work lies in her understanding of natality as a condition shared by all human beings—regardless of ability. Even a person with severe cognitive and physical impairments would qualify, under McCrary's reading, for the "right to have rights."<sup>lxxiv</sup> Drawing heavily on work that mines Arendt to discuss human rights, McCrary argues that Arendt "explicitly ties natality to political participation; because of the action of being born physically and inserting ourselves into the world, humans ought to be given the opportunity to likewise insert themselves into

the political community.’<sup>lxxv</sup> Moreover, she suggests, the “capacity to act is a given and stable part of the human condition.”<sup>lxxvi</sup>

While I agree with McCrary that Arendt’s works have promise for thinking disability, she focuses far too heavily on a more stable understanding of human dignity than seems defensible in my own reading of Arendt.<sup>lxxvii</sup> Rather than turn to Arendt for help thinking about the moral and political *status* of persons with disabilities, I suggest we might look to her in order to remind ourselves that freedom only manifests itself *through* action.

Although Krause is skeptical of Arendt’s reading of the self as an ephemeral identity that comes into being only when one inserts oneself into the world, Arendt’s conception of selfhood shifts our attention away from “what” we are and onto “who” we enact. In Arendt’s thinking, descriptors of identity like race or gender only capture “what” I am: “the qualities [I] necessarily share with others like [me].” Arendt’s concern, on the other hand, is with “who-ness”—that impossibly quixotic, “living essence of the person as it shows itself in the flux of action and speech”<sup>lxxviii</sup> Via this conception of selfhood, a person with mental illness need not be able to recognize a stable self in her actions in order either to have an effect on the world or to disclose her identity. Sometimes, Arendt allows, the self we expose is fragmented and incomplete—and oftentimes it is unknown to the actor herself. Krause recognizes this but still wants to hold on to a self that precedes and drives action.<sup>lxxix</sup> Moreover, Krause, at times, seems to suggest that action only becomes agency when it is successful and acquires “social uptake”—i.e. “that others understand your action in ways that are consonant with your understanding of it, and that they respond to the action in ways that sustain its meaning and impact.”<sup>lxxx</sup> While it is certainly true that social uptake is critical to the effectiveness of any action and that this social uptake can be frustrated by multiple factors, Arendt emphasizes that freedom arises in the experience of action itself—not as a

result of it. We do not act because we are free; nor do we become free after action. Agency does not consist of a status, but is instead only manifested in the activity. According to Arendt, it is only *through* acting that we experience freedom. As she puts it, “Men *are* free—as distinguished from their possessing the gift for freedom—as long as they act, neither before nor after; for to *be* free and to act are the same.”<sup>lxxxix</sup>

As Krause recognizes, Arendt’s work provides the basis for her own critique of sovereignty. In her essay “What is freedom?” Arendt argues that the modern concept of freedom has become deeply enmeshed in assumptions about individual sovereignty and autonomy. Arendt’s own conception emphasizes the fact that freedom is not a permanent state of being, but a product of human action. Like Krause, she is critical of the liberal assumption that human freedom requires an absence of constraints and is manifested in the ability to choose among a variety of different options. Arendt argues that, unlike the ancients, who recognized that freedom required a public space in which human beings could come together and act, modern theorists have internalized the concept—turning it into “the inward space into which men may escape from external coercion and feel free.”<sup>lxxxii</sup> Her essay traces how freedom has become an “attribute of thought or a quality of the will” rather than “an accessory of doing and acting.”<sup>lxxxiii</sup>

The problems with this understanding of freedom are two-fold. First, it encourages the liberal assumption that our own freedom comes at the price of another’s, and thereby, contributes to an understanding of power as domination or oppression (a point with which Krause engages only briefly). Second, Arendt argues (and Krause agrees) that sovereignty, understood as a free will independent from others, is simply unattainable. As Arendt puts it, “whatever men may be, they are never sovereign.”<sup>lxxxiv</sup> Via Arendt’s way of thinking, human beings are deeply conditioned. In *The Human Condition*, she suggests, the only thing all human

beings have in common is that they are conditioned beings—conditioned by that which they themselves create.<sup>lxxxv</sup> In her distinctions between labor, work, and action, Arendt recognizes that we are never fully free from the conditions of human existence; every act is deeply enmeshed in a complex matrix of power, in which factors like biology, as well as historical circumstance, socioeconomic class, and even pure chance constrain the actions available to us.

And yet we can nonetheless experience freedom. The miraculous part of human action is that we act *despite* these conditions not in the absence of them. To return then to people with disabilities, it is our ability to act in spite of the conditions that constrain us that constitutes freedom for Arendt. So a deaf person who participated in the Deaf President Now protests at Gallaudet University in 1988, demanding an deaf president who shared the experiences of Gallaudet’s deaf students, experiences freedom in that moment—acting despite the conditioning of her lived experience. Even the deeds of a mentally ill person might be understood as agency, via my reading of Arendt, because they are let loose into the web of human relationships and disclose an (albeit fragmented and possibly unknown) self. While Arendt recognizes that freedom requires “liberation from the necessities of life,”<sup>lxxxvi</sup> this liberation is only ever temporary. Freedom is, for Arendt, like action in that it is an ephemeral. We are not free to act, but become free by acting. Put differently, freedom is in the doing; it is not the prerequisite for action but the act itself.

This is not to say that Arendt’s thinking maps easily onto the concerns of disability theorists, particularly insofar as she discusses the body. In this sense, Krause’s turn to new materialism and the corporeality of agency represents a necessary correction to Arendt’s sometimes problematic approach to biological necessity.<sup>lxxxvii</sup> And while Arendt sidesteps the pitfalls of assumptions of autonomy and a stable human nature (as criticized in Arneil’s

work), it is hard to imagine translating her understanding of agency to a person with severe cognitive limitations (although McCrary attempts just this feat). My interest in Arendt centers not on the status of disabled persons in her theory but on the promise that her thinking might have for exploring the activity of those who engage in politics. Insofar as she releases her readers from the more stringent concerns of selfhood that constrain Krause's thinking on non-sovereign agency, Arendt thus offers a version of non-sovereign agency that accords well with the insights of disability theorists.

## VI. CONCLUSION

In a later line in Jennifer Bartlett's poems from *Autobiography*, she writes, "to be crippled means to have a window into the insanity of the able-bodied. . . to be crippled means to have access to people's fear of their own eroding"<sup>lxxxviii</sup> Here, Bartlett understands that the discomfort that often attends discussions of disability rests in our own anxiety, because unlike race, gender, and sexual orientation, the potential to become a person with a disability is universally shared. As we age, each one of us becomes more familiar with a body that "fails to materialize in accordance with prevailing norms"—oftentimes frustrating our experience of selfhood and agency. This universal experience of disability, whether through congenital illness, temporary injury, or simply the natural process of aging highlights the importance of including disability in our discussions of structural inequality. But despite the promise that Krause's discussion of non-sovereign agency holds for thinking through the social inequalities, her work ultimately sidesteps this important conversation, veering dangerously close to assumptions about disability that have been debunked by disability scholars. Although it would seem that we could apply Krause's approach easily to questions of social inequality on the basis of ability, her insistence on a stable sense of self poses difficulties. In drawing attention to these lacunae in Krause's text, my intent is not to blame

or shame her, but to highlight additional ways in which her thinking might be extended to understand a form of social oppression no less pernicious than that on the basis of race, gender, or sexual orientation. In this sense, I hope my contribution responds to Krause’s call to “inhabit our freedom in ways that extend it more fully to others.”<sup>xix</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Bartlett, Black, and Northen, *Beauty Is a Verb*.

<sup>ii</sup> “Bodies in Action.”

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.*, 315.

<sup>iv</sup> *Ibid.*, 317.

<sup>v</sup> Krause, *Freedom beyond Sovereignty*, 6.

<sup>vi</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>vii</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>viii</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

<sup>ix</sup> Krause, “Bodies in Action,” 302.

<sup>x</sup> Krause, *Freedom beyond Sovereignty*, 16.

<sup>xi</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>xii</sup> *Ibid.*, 16, 46 passim.

<sup>xiii</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>xiv</sup> A note on terminology: following Barbara Arneil, I use the term disability in keeping with the definition offered in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities as: “the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others” (see Arneil 2016, 27). I will discuss the various definitions of disability later in this essay. In the meantime, I will note that while some scholars of disability are strong advocates for certain terms over others (e.g. differently-abled v. disabled), opinions on proper terminology vary. There is consensus, however, on the importance of “people-first” language that fronts the human beings who may have a disability instead of referring to the disability as a stand in for an individual. So, for instance, we might say that a child “has a developmental delay” rather than “is developmentally delayed.” Similarly, it is preferably to say “someone has (a mental illness or epilepsy)” rather than “s/he is mentally ill or an epileptic” [http://www.inclusionproject.org/nip\\_userfiles/file/People%20First%20Chart.pdf](http://www.inclusionproject.org/nip_userfiles/file/People%20First%20Chart.pdf) [https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/pdf/disabilityposter\\_photos.pdf](https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/pdf/disabilityposter_photos.pdf) The exception to this practice, which I will discuss in greater detail below, is the reference to a person who is unable to hear as Deaf, the capitalization signaling a specifically political move on the part of Deaf individuals to identify themselves as part of a linguistic minority (see Lane 2006).

<sup>xv</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, vii.

<sup>xvi</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>xvii</sup> Coole and Frost, *New Materialisms*, 9.

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- xviii Ibid., 32.
- xix Ibid., 25.
- xx Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, xvi.
- xxi Ibid., viii.
- xxii Orlie, “Impersonal Matter.”
- xxiii Ibid., 119.
- xxiv Ibid., 121.
- xxv Ibid., 120.
- xxvi Ibid., 133.
- xxvii Ibid., 134.
- xxviii Kruks, “Engaging Discrepant Materialisms,” 264.
- xxix Ibid., 266.
- xxx Ibid., 268.
- xxxi Krause, *Freedom beyond Sovereignty*, 43.
- xxxii Ibid.
- xxxiii Ibid., 45.
- xxxiv Ibid., 29.
- xxxv Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 183.
- xxxvi Krause, *Freedom beyond Sovereignty*, 30.
- xxxvii Ibid., 45.
- xxxviii Ibid., 48.
- xxxix Ibid., 51.
- xl Ibid., 50.
- xli Ibid., 34.
- xlii Ibid., 35.
- xliiii Ibid., 39.
- xliv Ibid., 83–93.
- xlv Ibid., 86.
- xlvi Ibid., 87.
- xlvii Ibid., 89.
- xlviii Ibid.
- xliv Ibid., 93.
- l Ibid., 94.
- li Ibid., 95, 97.
- lii Ibid., 59.
- liii Arneil and Hirschmann, *Disability and Political Theory*, 21.
- liv Ibid., 29.
- lv Arneil and Hirschmann, *Disability and Political Theory*; Arneil, “Disability, Self Image, and Modern Political Theory.”
- lvi Arneil, “Disability, Self Image, and Modern Political Theory,” 224–25.
- lvii Indeed, in turning to new materialism for inspiration, Krause engages a body of literature that has many affinities with the critiques of agency leveled by disability theorists (see Garland-Thomson, “Misfits.”)
- lviii Bartlett, Black, and Northen, *Beauty Is a Verb*, 212.
- lix Krause, *Freedom beyond Sovereignty*, 55.
- lx Krause, *Freedom beyond Sovereignty*, 55, 107.

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<sup>lxi</sup> Krause, “Bodies in Action,” 302.

<sup>lxii</sup> By my count, Krause uses the word “disabling” over 28 times throughout the text. But rather than referring to disability, Krause uses the term to highlight the ways in which our agency is frustrated and incapacitated by social inequality. Krause, *Freedom beyond Sovereignty*, passim.

<sup>lxiii</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>lxiv</sup> Krause, *Freedom beyond Sovereignty*.

<sup>lxv</sup> Charlton, “Disability Oppression,” 218.

<sup>lxvi</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

<sup>lxvii</sup> Krause, *Freedom beyond Sovereignty*, 59.

<sup>lxviii</sup> The classic example is that of a person in a wheelchair. The social model of disability would argue that the difficulties experienced by this person are less a result of their specific impairment and more a result of buildings built with stairs instead of ramps. In a different social context, these theorists argue, a wheelchair is less constraining. (see Hirschmann, “Disabling Barriers, Enabling Freedom,” 99).

<sup>lxix</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>lxx</sup> Siebers, “Disability in Theory,” 175.

<sup>lxxi</sup> Lane, Harlan, “Construction of Deafness.”

<sup>lxxii</sup> Take, for example, the Deaf President Now protests at Gallaudet in the 1980s, which called for the administration of the college to more closely represent that of its students.

<sup>lxxiii</sup> McCrary, “Hannah Arendt and Disability: Natality and the Right to Inhabit the World,” 203.

<sup>lxxiv</sup> *Ibid.*, 203.

<sup>lxxv</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

<sup>lxxvi</sup> *Ibid.*, 206.

<sup>lxxvii</sup> Biser, “Calibrating Our ‘Inner Compass.’”

<sup>lxxviii</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 181.

<sup>lxxix</sup> Krause, *Freedom beyond Sovereignty*, 35.

<sup>lxxx</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>lxxxii</sup> Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 153.

<sup>lxxxiii</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

<sup>lxxxiv</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

<sup>lxxxv</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>lxxxvi</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 9. *C.f.* McCrary’s argument that what humans have in common is the capacity for action. I would argue that Arendt’s work on totalitarianism shows precisely how malleable human nature is; therefore resting protections for disabled persons on this capacity—which can be thwarted and eliminated—is problematic.

<sup>lxxxvii</sup> Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 148.

<sup>lxxxviii</sup> Although, as I argue elsewhere, Arendt’s approach to biological necessity is more nuanced than she is often given credit. See Biser, “‘The Unnatural Growth of the Natural’: Reconsidering Nature and Artifice in the Context of Biotechnology.”

<sup>lxxxix</sup> Bartlett, Black, and Northen, *Beauty Is a Verb*.

<sup>lxxxix</sup> Krause, *Freedom beyond Sovereignty*, 191.

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