

Knocking Out Bricks: Crip Foundations for Building Aesthetic Inclusion

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For David Mitchell, translator of *The Reason I Jump*, Higashida's book "knocks out a brick in the wall."¹ The wall, here, being the metaphorical walls so often imagined imprisoning the bodyminds of autistic people.² The book, following Mitchell's remark, does not and arguably cannot knock down those walls in one fell swoop. Rather, it knocks out one brick, which combined with additional bricks knocked out over the past few decades by autistic and more broadly disability scholars, activists, and accomplices have provided opportunities to not only think, feel, and teach differently towards neurological diversity and its intersections with other forms of difference, but also come into presence under different conditions. In his paper, Hudak explores ontological status and its partial "depend[ence] upon the nature of society."³ Drawing on Higashida and Deligny, he offers criteria, rooted in autistic ontologies, to challenge dominant neurotypical worldviews. For my response, I want to shift to contemplate aesthetics and the under-engaged role aesthetics plays in "viewing" worlds. After all, for Bruggeman, "disability enables insight—critical, experiential, cognitive, sensory, and pedagogical insight" and part of such "insight" is the work of seeing the other.⁴

The brick knocked out by Higashida's book drops into piles of bricks that create innumerable opportunities. They might be replaced, maintaining a separation that divides an "us" and a "them." They might be lobbed through windows, shattering the clarity of glass that thwarted travel through to the other side. They might, as well, be used to build alternative foundations: foundations for bridges that allow not only travel but new ways of seeing the world. It is this latter use I want to draw on moving from the bridge, in its suspended space, to its foundations. Foundations, of course, create

a bridge of sorts between the ground and the suspended structure. They impact what kind of bridge is made, including what it looks like and what one looks at from it. Yet, foundations are often covered up or covered over and taken for granted in ways similar to the work of aesthetics in our everyday lives. In contemplating ontological inclusion, particularly around bodyminds, there is a need to explore the work of aesthetics in how we respond to encountering others in their physical presence. Prior to ontological inclusion I want to suggest that there is a need to unpack an aesthetics of inclusion that addresses the ways judgments are made around “marked” individuals.

Within disability rights activism and legal frameworks around disability, questions of inclusion through integration have been central. Building on the logics presented in *Brown v. Board of Education*, disability rights advocates have succeeded in expanding access to, in particular, schools. Central to such success has been a reliance on contact theory, or the idea that contact with others who are different from oneself will assist in reducing prejudice and discrimination. Scholarship has shown minor success with such an idea, particularly around the expansion of rights for gay and lesbian people. And while Jasmine Harris points out “indisputably, contact between people with and without disabilities has increased,” she continues, “increased contact alone has proven insufficient... to shift societal norms of disability.”⁵ There is, in Harris’s view, a need to uncover the aesthetic difficulties in meeting others at the individual level. How do we address the ways we view others and the visible markers that impact how we judge what we see, particularly as we encounter bodyminds that hold up social norms as the constitutive outside of such norms?

Higashida, as Hudak notes, is attentive to the need to educate neurotypicals to be understanding when they come into contact with neuro-atypicals. Yet, neither Higashida nor Hudak take up the aesthetic and affective responses that are triggered upon such contact. “Contact triggers aesthetic-affective responses to disability,” as Harris argues, “that make it hard for non-disabled people—unaccustomed to the broad spectrum of

capabilities of people with disabilities—to overcome deeply rooted and seemingly intuitive aesthetic judgments.”⁶ Understanding is implicated in aesthetics and our visceral reactions to what we encounter, reactions rooted in our social and evolutionary histories.⁷

The brick that is knocked out by Higashida’s pedagogical *The Reason I Jump* is one brick among the many that are needed to help build a foundation for a “bridge” that assists in, as bridges are wont to do, overcoming or passing over obstacles, including aesthetic ones. A history of bridges can illustrate the different ways in which foundations have been, are, and could be built attending to different needs. It matters, so to speak, what matter is used to build foundations that establish aesthetic objects and our judgment. Moving from literal bridges to metaphorical ones, we might remember, as Donna Haraway argued:

It matters what matters we use to think other matters with;
it matters what stories we tell other stories with; it matters
what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts,
what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what
worlds make stories.⁸

The bricks knocked out and reused matter in how they are refigured in building different foundations to look out from. Within the narratives of autism, we are starting to see, as Hudak points out, different narrative conditions being narrated and expanding ontological possibilities of “being human.” Bricks are being rearranged upon falling out of the wall. Embedded in such work are different foundations for an aesthetics of inclusion that attends to the visible behavioral and sensory markers that often present challenges when people meet. The rise of autistic autobiographies that began to emerge in the 1990s into the 2000s have contributed to helping us see such markers anew. Or, as Rachael Groner argued, such autistic autobiographies are “starting to write autism into existence as queer, disallowing a discourse in which autism is solely defined as a medical and neurological disorder.”⁹ These autistic autobiographies, including Higashida’s, knock out more bricks to be reformed, reformulated, and chipped away at, to build

alternative aesthetic foundations for encountering others, and in time to build ways of not only being *crip*, but also expanding notions of integration.

Newly knocked out bricks and the foundations they could build are less inclined to hold up and hold out for joining “human,” as so narrowly envisioned. Rather, they call into question the world as it has come to frame human, not solely around neurological difference, but the ways in which neurological difference intersects with other forms of difference to create aesthetic forms that bodyminds can take. There is a certain perverting of human going on, as the project disrupts the reproduction of normative worlds and the relations between humans to gesture toward new modes of aesthetic inclusion. Such aesthetic responses require alliance building that disputes the binary categorizations of autistic and non-autistic to recognize interrelations and the complexities of encountering difference. Ontological presence is impacted by the aesthetic matters that we use to frame becoming and being human. Diversity and divergence rule the day, but this is not to make a universalizing claim that we are all “just human,” since our bodyminds are always already marked by visible and behavioral characteristics. “Claiming that everyone is disabled in some way perversely decenters disability,” argue Ho, Kerschbaum, Sanchez, and Yergeau; “We need not address disabled people if everyone and no one is simultaneously disabled.”¹⁰ Rather, we build new worlds together through diverse modes of relationality that are themselves expanded, perhaps transformed, by the *autos*—that ability to be with oneself in the presence of others without defensiveness, as Hudak puts it. Central, and unaddressed however, is the embodied experience of being in the presence of others. Ontological inclusion relies on altering aesthetic judgments and how, in the presence of others, we judge the others visible and behavioral markers to see the other in new ways. Higashida, in a 2017 interview, gets at this a bit. When asked, “What do neurotypical people agonize over too much?” he responded:

Human relations. Not wanting to be left out of the group, or wanting to be better than others—this kind of mentality makes relations between people way more fraught than necessary. Sometimes I

wonder if the human intellect can nudge us backward.¹¹

And backwards we might need to go, back to the matters we use to build foundations to distribute the weight differently such that people can meet and in meeting see others and become together.

- 1 Naoki Higashida, *The Reason I Jump: The Inner Voice of a Thirteen-Year-Old Boy with Autism* (New York, NY: Random House, 2013), xvii.
- 2 Margaret Price, "The Bodymind Problem and the Possibilities of Pain," *Hypatia* 30, no. 1 (2015): 268-284.
- 3 Glenn Hudak, "On the Allure of Bridges vs. Diving for Pearls: A Phenomenological Inquiry into Autism and Ontological Inclusion," *Philosophy of Education* 76, no. 2 (2020).
- 4 Brenda Bruggeman, "An Enabling Pedagogy: Meditations on Writing and Disability," *JAC* 21, no. 4 (2001): 795.
- 5 Jasmine E. Harris, "The Aesthetics of Disability," *Columbia Law Review* 119, no. 4 (2019): 899.
- 6 Harris, "Aesthetics of Disability," 931.
- 7 Justin Park, Jason Faulkner, and Mark Schaller, "Evolved Disease-Avoidance Processes and Contemporary Anti-Social Behavior: Prejudicial Attitudes and Avoidance of People with Physical Disabilities," *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior* 27, no. 2 (2003): 65-87.
- 8 Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 12.
- 9 Rachael Groner, "Sex as Spock: Autism, Sexuality, and Autobiographical Narrative" in *Sex and Disability*, eds. Robert McRuer and Anna Mollow (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 270.
- 10 Ai Binh T. Ho, Stephanie L. Kerschbaum, Rebecca Sanchez, and Melanie Yergeau, "Crippling Neutrality: Student Resistance, Pedagogical Audiences, and Teacher Accommodations," *Pedagogy* 20, no. 1 (2020): 133.
- 11 Nate Hopper, "My Autism Allows me to see the World in a Different Way,"

Time Magazine, July 13 2017, <https://time.com/4856602/autism-nonverbal-book-naoki-higashida/>.