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Introduction to Carol Rogers-Shaw's "Disabled Lives and Pandemic Lives: Stories of Human Precarity"

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Introduction to Carol Rogers-Shaw’s “Disabled Lives and Pandemic Lives: Stories of Human Precarity”

Gail Boldt

The idea for Carol Rogers-Shaw’s essay began in April 2020, six weeks into the initial COVID-19 lockdown, at her Zoom-based PhD dissertation defense. Carol’s dissertation brought together a narration of her life as a person with a disability and her work as a high school teacher of students with identified disabilities, conceptualized and reconceptualized through the lens of critical disability studies.

Carol’s dissertation was a thing of beauty, simultaneously moving and critical, hopeful and angry, vulnerable and clear-eyed. Listening to her defense while sitting in my dining room in that strange Zoom space that seemed able to be everywhere but at the same time nowhere, I became aware of a powerful resonance between the experiences many of us were struggling with in the COVID-19 pandemic and Carol’s description of receiving her diagnosis at the age of 20. Feelings of loss, fear, and frustration and the need to remake life in the face of unexpected limitations felt all too familiar.

Although at that time I could not imagine that we would be in the grip of COVID-19 two years later, Carol’s voice, I realized, was one that could help us to make some sense of the confusing emotions brought about by the pandemic and to think in broader, more caring, and more inclusive ways about education. Carol’s work, both in her dissertation and now, for us, in Issue #47 of the Bank Street *Occasional Paper Series*, provides a realist’s telling of how we make a life—a good life—even in the face of things we did not want or never imagined or asked for. She asks us to consider how we reconcile ourselves to the fact that we cannot always get or be what we want, but how that can also lead us to moments of empathy, connection, insight, and grace.

Carol’s essay, “Disabled Lives and Pandemic Lives: Stories of Human Precarity,” along with three response essays by four notable disability studies scholars—David Connor, Scott Danforth, and (writing collaboratively) Tonette Rocco and Debaro Huyler—make up the entirety of Issue #47. Publishing a single essay along with a few short responses has precedent in the *Occasional Paper Series* (see Issue #29 and Issue #24, for example). We do this when the author has something to say that needs significant space to develop fully and when it is a piece worth our long consideration.

As our four respondents make clear, this is the case with Carol’s essay. The devaluing of the lives of people with disabilities came into even sharper relief during the pandemic, with explicit and implicit calculations of lives worth saving. Carol is not asking that our experiences with the pandemic suddenly make us feel sorry for people with disabilities; she is telling us to wake up and realize how human diversity and human precarity are, among other things, resources for strength, creativity, and connection. That fact should make us all more humble, thoughtful, and open.

I am deeply grateful to Carol for her generosity and the intellectual and emotional labor that went into crafting this essay. Throughout the two years Issue #47 has been in the making, Carol was dealing with the pandemic and the threat it posed to her already complicated health, as well as the decline and ultimately the death of her beloved mother. My admiration for her persistence in completing this essay cannot be overstated. In addition, I am grateful to our four respondents who engaged thoughtfully with the essay, providing powerful framing for thinking further about disability and the pandemic.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Gail Boldt is a distinguished professor in the College of Education at the Pennsylvania State University in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction. She is on the undergraduate reading and elementary education faculty and is the professor in charge of the PhD emphasis in Language, Culture, and Society. Gail is also a clinical psychotherapist and a fellow in the College of Research Fellows of the American Psychoanalytic Association. Her research focuses on how studies of affect drawn from both Deleuzo-Guattarian and relational psychoanalytic sources can inform the creation of classrooms in which students and teachers experience vitality. She is the senior editor of the *Bank Street Occasional Paper Series*.