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Research Article

Autoethnography, Arts-Based Inquiry, and Disability Justice: Critical Reflections on Embodied Knowledge

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Abstract

Dominant approaches to health research often privilege Western, positivist paradigms that abstract health from lived experience and reinforce individualistic, ableist, and binary understandings of disability. Arts-based autoethnographic approaches offer alternative ways of knowing that foreground relational and embodied dimensions of illness and health. This paper reflects on the use of arts-based autoethnography as a disability justice-oriented approach to knowledge production, drawing on examples from the author's climate change research to illustrate how disability is experienced and negotiated in everyday life. It explores how narrative and artistic practices can expand understandings of health and embodiment, while situating climate precarity among several intersecting contexts. Poetry is employed to situate disability knowledge within broader social, political, and environmental contexts, treating arts-based autoethnography not as illustration but as a method of knowing. This paper demonstrates how disability justice can be achieved through expressions of lived experience, with climate change and societal conditions functioning as illustrative sites where unequal exposure to risk, care, and resources become visible. Artistic practices make legible forms of disability wisdom often marginalized within conventional health research, while challenging individualized and depoliticized framings of health. This reflection argues that arts-based autoethnography aligns closely with disability justice by resisting historically dominant research paradigms, expanding what counts as health knowledge, and centering marginalized ways of knowing. As both method and political stance, arts-based autoethnography offers generative approaches to health research that respond to social, environmental, and embodied realities without reducing them to singular or universal narratives.

Keywords: arts-based approaches, disability justice, climate change, embodied health, poetry

Introduction

As a disabled scholar writing at the intersection of climate change, health, and disability, I have been utilizing autoethnography both as a methodological commitment and a form of political resistance. Autoethnography, particularly in its narrative, arts-based, and multimodal forms, serves as a versatile methodology for scholars committed to elevating lived experience and contesting dominant knowledge systems that marginalize disabled perspectives. By positioning experiential

wisdom within broader cultural, political, environmental, and structural contexts, autoethnography functions as an interdisciplinary methodology for advancing social justice and re-imagining how knowledge about health and embodiment is produced (Adams & Herrmann, 2023; Pensoneau-Conway et al., 2017). Moreover, as a qualitative methodology, autoethnography is strengthened through researcher reflexivity, and the critical examination of how the researcher's identities, assumptions, and lived experiences shape the research process and interpretation of meaning. Reflexivity helps situate personal narratives within broader systems of power, meaning, and knowledge production (Adams et al., 2021). In contemporary qualitative research, reflexivity is increasingly understood as an ongoing and deliberate practice that extends throughout all stages of inquiry, including study design, data generation, analysis, interpretation, and dissemination (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). Researchers commonly engage in practices such as reflexive journaling, memo writing, positionality statements, and critical dialogue to examine how their perspectives, social locations, values, and relationships influence knowledge production. That is, in autoethnography, our experiences, and ourselves, become integral parts of what we express and come to know. This paper presents a critical reflection of my understanding of how autoethnography lives at the intersection of disability justice and arts-based inquiry. I use a series of poems to tell and show how I think about the potential of autoethnography as a form of political resistance.

The following poem is presented as a creative autoethnographic and reflexive engagement that resists dominant Western/Eurocentric forms of academic knowledge production. Poetic inquiry within autoethnography creates space for embodied, affective, and disability-informed ways of knowing that are often marginalized within conventional scholarly writing (Adams et al., 2021), and more specifically in climate change discourse. Introducing *Weathered Body* at the outset of this paper is intentional. The poem situates my embodied experience not as supplementary to analysis, but as foundational to how climate vulnerability, access, and disability intersect and are experienced within my body. The poem therefore functions not only as a personal creative expression, but it also invites the reader in, showing instead of telling how the weather impacts me and what this means in the face of climate change. Titled *Weathered Body*, the poem reads:

Weathered Body

I have learned to listen to weather
long before climate change became a daily headline.

My body taught me first.

Pressure dropping.
Heat lingering after sunset, dehydration, confusion.
Humidity settling deep into joints.
The slow tightening of breath.
Pain arriving before the storm and not leaving when it ends.

My body is a warning system.

When extreme weather is forecast,
preparation begins quietly.

charging devices,
filling water bottles,

counting medications,
mapping what I can carry alone.

What will I need?
Who can I call?

Disabled people make these calculations every day,
climate crisis or not.

What others call vulnerability
is often our lived knowledge
of how systems fail around us.

Heat warnings arrive.
Humidex above 40.
Cooling centres inaccessible.
Transportation unreliable.

Can we afford air conditioning?
Air purifiers?
The power bill?
Will there even be power?

Emergency preparedness assumes a certain kind of body-mind:

one that evacuates quickly,
waits in long lines,
carries heavy supplies,
understands instructions immediately,
survives independently.

Sometimes I forget the risks;
even while living inside them.

How do we survive
within systems never built for us?

But disability is not only a story of risk.

We hold intersectional wisdom.
Knowledge forged through survival.

Disabled people know interdependence intimately.
We build mutual aid networks.
We improvise access.
We jury-rig equipment.
We adapt because we have always had to.

We understand pacing.
Care.
Fatigue.
Trauma.
Uncertainty.
The grief of losing what once was.

Disabled communities have practiced collective care
long before resilience became climate language.

Our lives hold knowledge
about surviving together
in a world changing faster than expected.

As disabled people,
we have been preparing for this.

For me, autoethnography holds unique potential for advancing disability justice. This is in part because it enables the articulation of embodied knowledge and lived experience that have historically been marginalized within health research, academia, policymaking, and society more broadly (Alshammari, 2024; Couser, 2009). As disability justice calls us to move beyond inclusion and access toward a critical examination of ableism, racism, capitalism, settler-colonialism, and other interlocking systems of oppression (Berne et al., 2018), its pairing with autoethnography positions disability not as deficit, but as a site of valuable knowledge production, resistance, and collective action (Davies, 2022). In this paper, I examine how autoethnography, especially in its accessible, arts-based, and creative forms, can serve as a powerful methodology for advancing disability justice across interconnected domains, including health, environment, and social policy. I suggest that, at its best, autoethnography offers a set of creative, relational, and political practices that centre lived experience and expose how power shapes whose knowledge is recognized, valued, and legitimized. By challenging exclusionary epistemologies that privilege objectivity, detachment, and institutional expertise, autoethnography expands the boundaries of what counts as valid evidence and who is recognized as a legitimate knowledge-holder within and beyond academic spaces. This expansion is needed, as dominant academic knowledge systems have historically privileged detached and *objective* forms of knowledge, while marginalizing embodied, experiential, and disability-informed ways of knowing; thereby reproducing existing power inequities in whose knowledge is recognized and legitimized.

Importantly, while I highlight autoethnography as a valuable arts-based and multimodal research methodology, it is not without limitations. Questions of vulnerability and ethical responsibility can complicate its use, particularly within institutional structures that continue to privilege objectivity and neutrality (Sparkes, 2024). In this paper, I explore how autoethnography, when approached through accessible, creative, and arts-based forms, can advance disability justice while also attending to the methodological and ethical tensions that accompany its use. To illustrate this potential, I weave my own embodied experiences throughout the paper through narrative and arts-based autoethnographic practices, showing how the flexibility and accessibility of autoethnography can illuminate the lived realities of disability and allow for more inclusive and expansive ways of knowing.

Understanding Autoethnography: Origins, Positioning, and Purpose

Autoethnography was first referenced in the 1970's alongside the rise of identity politics (Adams & Herrmann, 2023), yet it was not until the 1990's that it emerged as a recognizable and legitimate research tool, as scholars began to see the merit in personal narratives as a source of cultural analysis (Ellis, 2016). Contextually, both the history and use of autoethnography "overlaps with, and is indebted to, research and writing practices in anthropology, sociology, psychology, literary criticism, journalism, and communication… [and the work of] storytellers, poets, and musicians" (Holman Jones, 2005, p. 765). Autoethnography has since evolved with the increasing use and importance of researcher reflexivity in qualitative studies (Muncey, 2010), balancing narrative, creative expression, and methodological rigour (Pensoneau-Conway et al., 2017). Today, autoethnography is a well-established methodology that involves the researcher using their lived experience as the primary source of data to illuminate collective experience and social phenomena (Holman Jones, 2016; Pensoneau-Conway et al., 2017). Holman Jones (2005) explains that researchers use autoethnography to describe and analyze (graphy), one's personal experiences (auto), with aims to understand our cultural and political experiences (ethno). It is utilized as both a method and a way of being that is deeply relational, reflexive, and emotive, with aims to produce knowledge that is accessible, ethical, and socially meaningful (Adams et al., 2021; Bochner & Rushing, 2002; Ellis, 2007). In these ways, when utilized as a methodology, autoethnography refers not only to a *product* or outcome but it also relates to the *process*, where one uses tenets of autobiography and ethnography to share personal experience (Adams & Herrmann, 2023; Ellis, 2016).

Conceptual Foundations: Disability Justice Meets Autoethnography

To assist in situating the role, practices, and limitations of autoethnography as a methodology for generating knowledge that serves disabled people, I will briefly explore and define the history and aims of disability justice. Contextually, the disability rights movement played a critical role in establishing civil rights for disabled people, securing greater access to education, employment, and public life (Goulden et al., 2023). Gaining momentum in the 1960s, this movement culminated in landmark legislation such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990 in the United States (Scotch, 2001), and the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) in 1995 in the United Kingdom (Goodley, 2017). Similar legislative efforts emerged globally throughout the 1990s, reflecting a growing recognition of disabled people's rights to equal participation in society. While the disability rights movement achieved important legal and cultural gains, it failed to adequately address how intersecting forms of oppression, such as racism, settler-colonialism, sexism, and heteronormativity shape the experiences of disabled people (Berne et al., 2018; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018). Drawing on Crenshaw's (1991,1997) theory of intersectionality, disability justice emerged in response to these limitations, by emphasizing that disability cannot be understood in isolation from other structures of power and marginalization. Consequently, the global disability justice movement, centers the leadership and lived experiences of disabled people, who are marginalized across multiple social locations, and calls for more radical, intersectional, and community-based approaches toward collective liberation (Sins Invalid, 2016).

The term *disability justice* was developed by members of Sins Invalid (2016), a performance project and disability justice collective led by disabled queer, trans, Black, Indigenous, and people of colour activists, including Patty Berne, Stacey Milbern, and Mia Mingus. Disability justice emerged in response to the limitations of mainstream disability rights approaches by centring the experiences of those living at the intersections of disability, race, gender, sexuality, class, and colonialism. This intersectional focus is particularly important given the disproportionate prevalence of disability among historically marginalized communities. For example, Courtney-Long et al. (2017) found that

approximately one in four Black Americans identify as disabled, highlighting the need for frameworks that address the interconnected systems of oppression shaping disabled people's lives. This matters, as when we engage in disability justice, we are called to adopt an intersectional lens, recognizing that ableism connects to other social injustices (Nishida, 2018).

Building on the early aims of the disability rights movement, disability justice is a comprehensive approach to securing rights and liberations for disabled people, recognizing and prioritizing diverse intersectional experiences and communities (Berne et al., 2018; Lewis, 2023). Autoethnography pairs well with the goals of disability justice, as "stories allow us to live more reflective, more meaningful, and more just lives" (Pensoneau-Conway et al., 2017, p. 13). Indeed, scholars note that autoethnography is well aligned with social justice goals, as narrative and arts-based expressions connected to systemic issues help challenge dominant norms, promote ethical change, and improve societal conditions (Adams et al., 2015; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Hughes & Pennington, 2016). Related to my areas of interest, Jampel (2018) states that disability justice and environmental justice intersect and reinforce each other, emphasizing that each struggle cannot be separated. By positioning intersectional and marginalized experiences at the heart of autoethnographic expression, the methodology aligns with disability justice's aims to challenge dominant health paradigms and expand what counts as legitimate knowledge toward more equitable and accountable praxis.

I utilize autoethnography as an embodied and accessible methodological approach that grounds knowledge production in lived experience and in sensory and affective ways of knowing, primarily through prose, poetry, painting, and photography. For me, autoethnography provides a way to attend to the intersections of disability and climate change as they are felt and negotiated in everyday life, through personal embodiment and sensations, environmental risks and exposure, and the uneven distribution of resources and care. Creative and arts-based autoethnographic approaches allow me to expose and express how systems fail me while also documenting my resistance and persistence. Similarly, through the witnessing of personal traumas, epiphanies, and complexities, Frank (2016) notes that "storytelling requires a commitment to speak the truth" (p. 21). This commitment is particularly vital in autoethnographic work that engages disability and environmental precarity, where embodied experience is often rendered invisible or abstracted within dominant research paradigms. Because disabled people have historically been examined, classified, and managed by institutions and researchers, autoethnography offers a means of reclaiming authorship over one's own body, environment, and expressions. Sharing my lived experience through creative and reflexive autoethnographic practices counters ableist objectification and marginalization, while also making visible how climate change is not an abstract future threat but a present, embodied reality that shapes disabled lives in uneven and intimate ways, as exemplified in the following poem:

The Door I Cannot Open

This February outage changes everything.
Heat leaves the rooms. I am alone.
My body cannot keep pace with the snow,
and the world continues without me.

This is not a metaphor; this is access:
the door I cannot open,
the path I cannot clear.
This is the distance between survival and belonging.

Principles of Disability Justice

Sins Invalid (2016) established 10 principles of disability justice highlighting the multifaceted and interrelated tenets of the framework: intersectionality; leadership of those most impacted; anti-capitalist politics; cross-movement solidarity; recognizing the wholeness of each person; sustainability; commitment to cross-disability solidarity; interdependence; collective access; and collective liberation. Overall, disability justice seeks to transform the struggle for accessibility into a broader vision of liberation, anchored in intersectionality and collective care, through positioning those most affected by intersecting oppressions to lead the work of dismantling systems of inequality (Berne et al., 2018; Crenshaw, 1991; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018).

To help articulate the role, practices, and limitations of autoethnography as a methodology for generating knowledge that serves disabled people and advances disability justice, I have given meaningful reflection to how autoethnography aligns with, or encounters challenges in relation to, each of Sins Invalid's (2016) ten principles of disability justice. For example, autoethnography can reflect the complexity of intersectional identities when the researcher or participants are reflexive, and it can center the leadership of disabled people most impacted, though some voices may still be missing. Principles such as anti-capitalist politics or interdependence must be explicitly articulated or theorized in autoethnography, while cross-movement solidarity, sustainability, and collective liberation can be actively integrated into the research or artistic design. Respecting the wholeness of each person and fostering collective access require deliberate attention to method, format, and participation. Throughout, reflexivity is central as it helps researchers explore diverse disabilities, consider who may be excluded, and ensure that autoethnographic practice contributes to the broader goals of disability justice.

Activists and scholars at the fore of the disability justice movement emphasize that these ten principles be integrated into all justice-oriented practices that involve disabled communities at micro (individual), meso (community/organization), and macro (structural/policy) levels (Goulden et al., 2023). This connects to disability research that utilizes autoethnography, as it is often utilized as a resistant methodology, a way to claim space for disability wisdom in spaces where this knowledge has been marginalized or altogether excluded (Couser, 2009; Holman Jones, 2016). Autoethnography pushes back against research *on* disabled people by centering research *by* and *with* disabled people. In these ways, I've found autoethnography offers unique value to the highlighted principles and goals of disability justice by legitimizing lived experience as credible knowledge and centering embodied subjectivity against ableist epistemologies.

Media and Mediums used in Autoethnography

Autoethnography is inherently flexible, creative, and expressive, encompassing a wide range of accessible practices and mediums (Adams et al., 2021; Ellis, 2007). Many forms of autoethnography naturally incorporate arts-based elements such as storytelling, poetic inquiry, creative nonfiction, performance writing, visual or multimodal representation, and sensory or embodied expression. This variability occurs both in what is collected or reflected on to do autoethnography and in the forms that autoethnography can take. Because of this openness, certain genres, such as evocative, performative, or creative autoethnography are explicitly described as arts-based. For instance, Leavy (2018, 2020) frames autoethnography as an arts-based research practice that can take the form of fiction, poetry, visual art, and performance that allow researchers to represent complex, sensory, and affective dimensions of lived experience; reach broader audiences beyond the academy; and advance social justice by disrupting hierarchical knowledge production and centering marginalized voices. Overall, across its forms, autoethnography situates the personal

as political, emphasizing the interconnection between individual experience and broader social structures (Berry & Clair, 2011).

Autoethnography is often enacted in deeply personal ways and is complemented by tools and methods that enhance rigour, reflexivity, ethical coherence, adaptability, and accessibility, particularly in relation to disability justice. Projects frequently begin as personal writing, including journal entries, poetry, blogs, or other reflective forms, through which authors make sense of their experiences (Pensoneau-Conway et al., 2017). While the self remains the primary site of data, researchers increasingly integrate arts-based and creative approaches into their work (Adams, 2025; Ellis, 2016; Pink, 2020). Other data sources may include artifacts such as photos, sculptures, medical records, emails, voice notes, social media posts, journals, fieldnotes, embodied mapping, archival analysis, or dialogues with self and others, including auto-interviews (Adams et al., 2021). Collaborative writing is also possible, as in co-autoethnography and duo-ethnography (Norris et al., 2012). Whether employing prose alone or integrating arts-based methods, autoethnography uses personal experience to generate insight into social worlds. Beyond its role as a qualitative research tool, autoethnography can also function as a philosophical and epistemological orientation, challenging conventional notions of objectivity and centering the lived, embodied knowledge of the researcher (Adams et al., 2021). In the context of disability research, I use autoethnography as a deliberate, resistant approach to centering the experience of disability and challenge erasure in academic and societal narratives.

Analytic Approaches in Autoethnography

Researchers using autoethnography to advance disability justice utilize a wide range of analytical methods. At the same time, the act of doing autoethnography can also constitute the analysis. Reflexivity should guide decisions about whether additional analytic strategies are necessary. This reflexive critical engagement is the part of the *analytical work*, even when it looks different than coding or statistical interpretation, as analyses in autoethnography are often embedded within the act of writing and creating (Ellis, 2016). Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) note the most used analytic methods in autoethnography are: reflexive thematic analysis, narrative analysis, critical discourse analysis, and *Creative Analytic Practices* (CAP). These methods are well-suited to autoethnographic inquiry because they prioritize meaning making from personal experience while attending to broader cultural and political contexts.

CAP for instance, uses artistic, layered accounts and poetic representations, to creatively analyze emotional and embodied knowledge that resists hegemonic norms and centers marginalized voices (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). Further, reflexive thematic analysis allows researchers to identify patterns in their experiences while recognizing their subjectivity and positionality as integral to the research process (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Narrative analysis can help researchers uncover how identity is constructed and communicated through storytelling, focusing on how life events are sequenced, framed, and interpreted (Riessman, 2015), while critical discourse analysis can be utilized to interrogate the influence of power and ideology, making it especially useful for autoethnographies concerned with social justice (Fairclough, 2013).

Lapadat (2017) shares that creating positive change is a critical aim of all autoethnographic work, so the impact of the work is one of the keyways to measure its integrity. In fact, Bochner (2016) cautions against over-formalizing criteria for evaluating autoethnography since it thrives on imagination and reflexive, ethical self-awareness. These perspectives affirm that the strength of autoethnography lies less in formalized analytic procedures and more in the expressive, relational, and meaning-making possibilities of narrative. In my disability research, autoethnographic practices become a way of connecting personal experience to broader cultural and political conversations and of challenging dominant paradigms that marginalize lived experience. Often, there is a felt sense of

awareness and understanding between those share similar experiences. This emotional resonance is significant in autoethnography, as it helps convey the affective and embodied dimensions of lived experience, fostering deeper relational understanding and connection between the text and the reader (Ellis, 2004). In my own work, through foregrounding disability wisdom, I attend to how climate change is experienced through disabled embodiment and everyday life; to make visible and emote the subjugated knowledge that is often excluded from climate research and policy. Doing autoethnography is not without risk however and comes with, I contend, certain responsibilities when one claims to use autoethnography for disability justice.

Navigating Risk and Responsibility in Autoethnography for Disability Justice

While autoethnography presents enticing possibilities for centering disabled wisdom, embodiment, and critical inquiry (Silverman, 2021), its use as a method for advancing disability justice is not without caveats and limitations. These limitations include methodological and ethical critiques that should be carefully considered by researchers committed to justice-oriented scholarship (Adams et al., 2015). While more generalized autoethnography assessments and limitations permeate the field, in the sections that follow, I highlight the most salient considerations for researchers using autoethnography as a creative method for generating knowledge that serves disabled people and advances disability justice.

Risks of Individualization and Depoliticization

When utilizing autoethnography as a qualitative research method that serves disabled people, it is important to consider that its emphasis on personal experience can unintentionally lead to the individualization of structural issues (Chang, 2008; Wall, 2016). This consideration is particularly important given principles of disability justice including intersectionality, commitment to cross-disability solidarity, interdependence, collective access, and collective liberation (Sins Invalid, 2016). That is, without clear engagement with intersectional systems of oppression, such as ableism, racism, capitalism, or settler-colonialism, there is a risk that autoethnography may become disconnected from the broader political struggles central to disability justice (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018). Some bodies of work could be read as too anecdotal, rather than critical, reinforcing neoliberal frameworks of self-responsibility and autonomy over priorities such as care and collective transformation. Thus, within the purview and purposes of disability justice, which emphasize intersectionality, collective liberation, and interdependence, our work should be explicitly situated within actionable frameworks (e.g., anti-ableist, anti-capitalist, anti-racist) to avoid being co-opted into individualized discourses (Berne et al., 2018; Mingus, 2017; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018). When enacted with intention, principles of disability justice counter autoethnography's tendencies toward individualization and depoliticization, ensuring that lived experience remains socially and politically situated.

Risk of Objectification

Another ethical challenge within autoethnography, is the risk of objectification and exploitation of disabled people and other historically marginalized communities. For example, when researchers document and express health, disability, and intersectional positionalities and experiences, they risk objectifying themselves or participants, or reducing complex identities to stereotypes (Richards, 2008). Furthermore, Svendby et al. (2018) note the danger of perpetuating the exotification of disabled people by non-disabled perspectives, or what Garland-Thomson (2009) terms the non-disabled stare. These risks underscore the need for those committed to disability

justice to keep at the forefront the ongoing realities of ridicule, marginalization, and objectification that many disabled people face; we must remain critically and reflexively attentive so as not to reproduce such dynamics. To mitigate these risks, researchers can adopt practices such as intentional reflexivity (Koopman et al., 2020), centering relational ethics (Baiju, 2023), and engaging with community-informed perspectives (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018). In my disability-justice centered autoethnographical work, this means refusing to flatten or pathologize embodied experience and instead amplifying connection and political meaning.

Barriers to Accessibility and Participation

Akin to other scholarly research methods, autoethnography assumes access to the tools and spaces of academic writing and work including time, energy, financial, and technological resources (Croft et al., 2024). As a disabled researcher, autoethnography offers me some freedom and flexibility, including the ability to engage in non-linear writing, multimodal data generation, and adaptive pacing aligned with fluctuating cognitive and physical capacities. At the same time, Goodley (2014) notes, accessibility is not a technical feature or individual accommodation, but part of the socio-political conditions that determine whose bodies and minds are recognized as able to participate, and under what terms. Thus, autoethnography, is not immune to exclusive, ableist underpinnings. Disabled people are often left out of research due to intersecting barriers, including poverty, chronic illness, isolation, and systemic discrimination (Dolmage, 2017; Mingus, 2017). As such, autoethnography could reinforce existing ableist academic gatekeeping unless deliberately reimagined through a disability justice lens; specifically, one that values multiple modes of expression (e.g., oral storytelling, art, performance, photography, and collective action). To address these barriers, researchers would do well to engage in ongoing reflexivity and co-creation of knowledge, continually negotiating accommodations, consent, and accessibility within their own reflexive practice, with participants, and with members of their research team and community. Adaptive methods should be provided for all participants and include accessible tools such as narrative aids, interpreters, sensory-friendly environments, and flexible formats Watharow and Wayland (2022). Ongoing reflexive check-ins and inventories of personal supports and care networks can also be built into research design (Silverio et al., 2022).

Relational Ethics

For an ethically responsible researcher, relational ethics are some of the most important aspects of *doing* autoethnography. In addition to adherence to traditional research ethics, which often focus on institutional review protocols and consent, relational ethics emphasizes the ongoing, context-sensitive, and reciprocal nature of ethical research (Brown & Strega, 2015). While consultation and approval through institutional research ethics boards is often required (Tullis, 2022), taking a relationally responsible approach to representation and research practice within a disability-justice framework calls us to *move beyond this*. According to Ellis (2007), relational ethics emphasize the importance of interpersonal relationships by highlighting mutual respect, dignity, and connection between the researcher and participants, as well as between researchers and the communities they engage with. As issues of power and vulnerability are always intertwined within our relationships and research, Adams et al. (2015) emphasize that autoethnography requires a relational responsibility; researchers are called to be mindful and ethical in how they represent themselves, others, and their audiences. Relatedly, Tolich (2010) argues that no story is about the self alone, and others (e.g., family, partners, friends, community members) are often embedded in narratives - necessitating ongoing consent. The *auto* in autoethnography does not absolve the researcher from responsibility, as we often cannot avoid implicating ourselves and others in our work (Tullis, 2022).

Relational ethics is an ongoing process that involves fostering research and community relationships that are reciprocal, collaborative, and grounded in mutual respect (Adams et al., 2015; Ellis 2007). Relational ethics also requires protecting the identities and privacy of those involved, while ensuring that the research is accessible to diverse audiences, as ultimately, relational ethics in autoethnographic writing is an opportunity to invite connection, dialogue, and engagement (Baiju, 2023; Ellis, 2007; Pensoneau-Conway et al., 2017). Overall, the key features of relational ethics in autoethnography that are generally discussed and understood by those engaged in the field are: responsibility to others, informed consent as an ongoing process, considerations of vulnerability and power, and accessibility and reciprocity (Tolich, 2010).

In sum, working toward relational ethics in autoethnography calls us to protect and prioritize interpersonal relationships, especially when working with participants from small and historically marginalized communities (Boylorn, 2017). We must be careful to consider how our art and storytelling can affect individuals who may be recognizable in our work (Adams et al., 2015; Tullis, 2022). Autoethnography therefore demands ongoing attention to relational ethics and ongoing confidentiality. Unlike assumptions baked into research ethics practices that require structured research protocols, informed consent is not a one-time agreement; it may require continual dialogue, especially when addressing trauma, vulnerability, or complex power dynamics (Baiju, 2023; Tolich, 2010). Researchers must also consider their own risks, as sharing personal experience can be emotionally and ethically challenging (Wall, 2016; Tolich, 2010; Tullis, 2022).

Concluding Reflections

As a flexible set of practices and mediums grounded by lived experience, autoethnography operates as a politically oriented research method well suited to advancing principles of disability justice. Multimodal autoethnographic works have successfully influenced policy and practice in fields such as health and the built environment, empowering disabled people to document and critique the systems that oppress them (Larrington Spencer, 2025). When disabled researchers illuminate structural barriers through personal storytelling and other arts-based practices, these narratives become evidence, entering academic and policy arenas as lived experiences that demand ethical and transformative action. In this way, autoethnography can itself embody disability justice through both form and function, centering disabled bodies, expressing resistance, and catalyzing systemic change.

Autoethnography that situates disability knowledge thus operates not only as a creative and flexible methodology, but also as a political stance, uniquely aligned with the aims of disability justice through its emphasis on lived experience, relational ethics, and resistance to dominant knowledge paradigms. Rooted in first-person experience, this approach centers disabled perspectives while challenging ableist assumptions by foregrounding interdependence and collective liberation. For my own research at the intersections of disability and climate change, autoethnography offers accessible mediums for expressing both disability wisdom and crisis, attending to how environmental instability is experienced through disabled bodies and everyday negotiations of risk and resilience. Through narrative and other arts-based expressions, autoethnography allows these experiences to be held together rather than separated into abstraction or urgency alone. Through my personal journey of expression with and through autoethnography, I have come to understand the medium as inseparable from the message, and the message as inseparable from the medium. The personal, embodied, and experience-based forms through which autoethnographic knowledge is expressed actively shape its meaning, while the insights generated about disability, health, injustice, and culture reaffirm the ethical and political necessity of these forms. In this co-constitutive relationship, autoethnography becomes not only a way of knowing but a way of insisting on whose experiences matter and how knowledge is mobilized in the pursuit of justice.

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Conflict of Interest

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

Declaration of Ethics

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