

Shayda Kafai, **Crip Kinship: The Disability Justice & Art Activism of Sins Invalid**, Vancouver, Canada: Arsenal Pulp, 2021, 192 pp., \$17.95 (paperback).

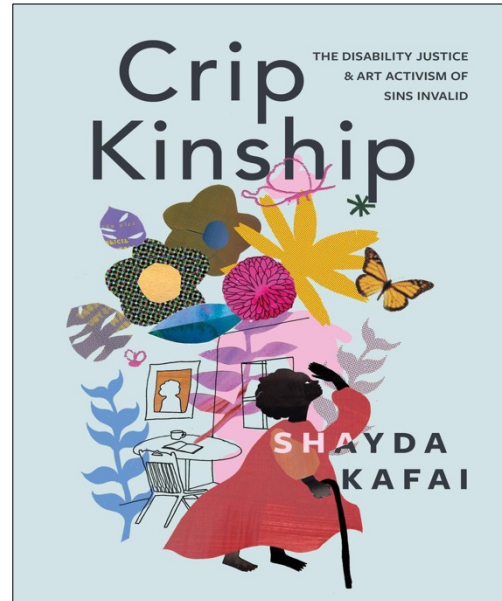
Reviewed by
Jaggar DeMarco
Temple University

Crip Kinship: The Disability Justice & Art Activism of Sins Invalid is a book of its time. In her introduction, Kafai notes that the genesis of the book began in 2016, during the tumultuous and traumatic presidential election. Likewise, the book was published amid the COVID-19 global pandemic (pp. 16–17). As such, the author explicitly situates her work as both emerging from, and a response to, various crises—from Trump’s sustained attacks on healthcare to the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated already existing disparities in medical care and treatment—especially for disabled black and brown bodies.

Crip Kinship is a book-length exploration of a performance art group based out of the San Francisco Bay area—Sins Invalid. Kafai describes Sins Invalid by writing, “Since their creation in 2006, [Sins Invalid] provides . . . Disability Justice–informed evenings of multidisciplinary art, workshops, and educational trainings that center the knowledges of disabled, queer, gender nonconforming, and transgender artist-activists of color” (p. 14). Throughout the book, Kafai uses Sins Invalid as a case study to make larger epistemological arguments about Disability Justice, and in particular, Sins Invalid’s “resilient disabled, queer of color future-making” (p. 14).

Historically, both Disability Studies and the larger Disability Rights movement have been criticized for centering white bodies almost exclusively, thereby erasing racial experience. This observation is perhaps most powerfully articulated by Chris Bell (2006), writing, “Disability Studies claims to examine the experiences of a vast number of disabled people, yet the form that representation takes is, far too often, a white one” (p. 278). *Crip Kinship* emerges from the sustained attention to race (and gender and sexuality) that has come in the aftermath of Bell’s contributions. Kafai articulates Disability Justice as an alternative to a Disability Rights framework. Disability Justice is a framework of “wholeness and persistence” (p. 22) that is not tied to legislation or compliance, as the Disability Rights framework has been. She further elaborates that Disability Justice works as a set of strategies for “survival for all our disabled, queer of color bodyminds” (p. 23).

Kafai is simultaneously engaged in a critical examination of a cultural object, while also endeavoring to translate academic theory into a scaffold for movement building. In so doing, Kafai makes the argument that art can be a tool for activism. Kafai is invested in the project of equitable future making. She writes that “perhaps this is the biggest gift Sins Invalid gives us: the vocabulary, guidance, and methods for a



social and political revolution that fearlessly centers the knowledge production of disabled, queer of color communities" (p. 180). For example, Kafai posits that "power comes from seeing your community on stage" (p. 51). Here, when Kafai writes about "power," we can understand it to mean the power to enact political and social change.

If this book is an examination of Disability Justice by way of the case study, this text is also bolstered by specific methodological choices. Throughout the book, Kafai deploys textual and discourse analysis as well as in-depth interviews to build her argument. Additionally, Kafai recognizes her own positionality—naming herself as a "disabled, queer, Mad, femme of color" (p. 14). She makes the active choice to insert her own lived experience by writing reflexively throughout the book. Kafai writes in a deliberately plain fashion that, in part, places the book squarely within the intellectual tradition of Disability Studies, which as a field, prioritizes access. This is both a stylistic and political choice that makes the content of the book as intelligible as possible to the widest audience possible.

Throughout this project Kafai invokes the concept of "bodyminds." This is an important concept to Disability Studies that emerges from feminist theory and has come to be foundational to intersectional understandings of Disability Studies (Price, 2015). The notion of a bodymind rejects a mind/body split. Rather, the body and mind are inextricable from one another, and are always already in dialogue. The bodymind is also embedded in history. This history is both generational and individual, subject to trauma and joy. As such, Disability Studies prioritizes access, thus Kafai's choice of publisher is noteworthy. Arsenal Pulp Press is invested in narratives that center multiple marginalized communities. In other words, the intellectual projects of Arsenal and Kafai align.

Furthermore, Kafai addresses her readership directly at multiple points. This is an active recognition that one of the intended audiences of the book is exactly the community she is writing about. This is a deliberate choice by Kafai, who is modeling a politics of care. She writes,

In the practice of disabled, queer of color love and resilience, I ask you to read this book with care. Care might mean reading in slowness with frequent breaks. It might mean pausing to journal or to gather the citations that are lifegiving or the lessons from *Sins Invalid* that you plan to apply to your own communal or daily practice. Care might also refer to honoring your tangible bodymind needs: closing your eyes, stretching, breaking to eat, or acknowledging the rise of feelings and pausing to cry. Move and process as you need to, dear reader. May it launch you toward cultivating the soil and the seedlings of your own liberatory future. (p. 27)

Here, we see inclusive modeling and practices. Kafai uses her reflexive style to imagine her work as a method of mutual aid. Mutual aid, in turn, is "a non-hierarchical and anti-capitalist structure of giving, of tenderness, and of crippled care" (p. 54). Communication scholars in particular would benefit from considering mutual aid as a methodological practice precisely due to this nonhierarchical structure. Kafai notes that in order to work, mutual aid requires a "constant focus on collaboration" (p. 54). Regardless of the presence of human participants in any given project, communication research is inherently collaborative, and it is essential to remember this.

Relatedly, while this book is in conversation with Disability Studies and ongoing concerns within that field, I contend that this book has utility for communication studies, and in fact, is vital precisely due to its focus on movement building, activism, and art. Just as there has been criticism of Disability Studies for its narrow vision of disability, communication studies has also been criticized for privileging the white body and experience as articulated through Chakravartty, Kuo, Grubbs, and McIlwain (2018). By situating *Crip Kinship*, and by extension the work of *Sins Invalid*, and the disabled queer of color bodyminds into dialogue with communication studies, we can hold space for epistemologies that have been historically undervalued by the academy, to its detriment. Attending to the knowledges of the most marginalized benefits us all. As Kafai states, "Education has and will always be the constant love-action moving us closer and closer toward a practice of justice and freedom" (p. 105).

Beyond its sustained investigation of *Sins Invalid* as a site of disability justice and future making, one of the major interventions of the book, which begins in chapter 2, is Kafai's concept of "crip-centric liberated zones" (p. 43). For Kafai, such zones become a way to reconceptualize public and private space while centering disabled bodies, specifically queer of color disabled bodyminds. It is simultaneously a means of processing generational trauma enacted on black and brown bodyminds while also imagining a more equitable future for all. Kafai states that crip-centric liberated zones are a means of "re-centering and decolonizing our bodyminds" (p. 43). They are "intentional and expansive examples of what crippled, queered, anti-capitalist access can look like" (p. 46). As such, these zones are less physical structures—although they may certainly have material presence—and instead operate as both a politics and a mode of thought. Kafai makes the point that such spaces might exist successfully online. *Sins Invalid* itself has since prioritized online spaces, recognizing that digital spaces can be more accessible for disabled people due to a lack of ready access to transportation.

Questions of access animate the text. Kafai positions access as an act of care. Access is a complex topic, with technological and sociological registers, however, this emphasis on care is also useful to communication scholars. Particularly in light of an ongoing pandemic and political polarization and strife, communication scholarship must grapple with these ethical questions that resist easy answers. This book allows us to begin this vital conversation. Drawing once more from crip-centric liberated zones, I suggest that Kafai invites us to rezone our lives into more accessible practices of being in the world.

References

- Bell, C. (2006). A modest proposal: Introducing white disability studies. In L. Davis (Ed.), *The disability studies reader* (2nd ed., pp. 275–282). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Chakravartty, P., Kuo, R., Grubbs, V., & McIlwain, C. (2018). #CommunicationSoWhite. *Journal of Communication*, 68(2), 254–266. doi:10.1093/joc/jqy003
- Price, M. (2015). The bodymind problem and the possibilities of pain. *Hypatia*, 30(1), 268–284. doi:10.1111/hypa.12127