



# Anthropology Book Forum

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**COLLIGAN, SUMI, & ANNA, JAYSANE-DARR. (EDS.). (2025). *The Disabled Anthropologist*. New York, NY: Routledge. 240 pp., ISBN 9781032760278.**

**Keywords:** disability, positionality, field methods, auto-ethnography, medical anthropology

What does it mean to be a disabled anthropologist? What barriers do disabled anthropologists encounter in their careers, and how have the methodological innovations and theoretical insights of disabled scholars enriched the field as a whole? While medical anthropology has a long history of analyzing impairment and there is a growing movement to bring insights from critical disability studies into conversation with anthropological theory, the voices of disabled anthropologists themselves are often missing. *The Disabled Anthropologist*, featuring ten auto-ethnographic chapters by disabled anthropologists from a wide variety of subdisciplines and career stages, sheds light on the rich experiences of disabled ethnographers.

This publication fittingly coincides with the 35th anniversary of the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and captures a moment when disability anthropology is beginning to be embraced by mainstream anthropology. As the volume's introduction by Sumi Colligan and Anna Jaysane-Darr explains, the collection was inspired by the early COVID-19 moment where disabled anthropologists who had long been dismissed for using digital, remote, or "patchwork" ethnography (Boellstorff 2020; Günel, Varma, and Watanabe 2020; Rogers 2023) suddenly found themselves turned to as experts for how to conduct fieldwork amidst lockdown. While such newfound recognition can be validating, it also served as a reminder of the ways disabled ethnographer's innovations are dismissed as "mere accommodations" rather than celebrated as a way to make the field more humane and inclusive to all body-minds. By centering the experiences of disabled ethnographers, the volume invites the reader into a project of re-imagining ethnographic methods and the discipline of anthropology as a whole.

The volume starts off with disabled anthropologists theorizing the ableist underpinnings of anthropology. Valerie Black (Ch 1) unpacks the figure of the “intrepid anthropologist:” the mythical Malonaskian archetype of the hyper-mobile white cisgendered heterosexual male, blithely unconcerned for their own wellbeing or access needs. Black explores how intrepid ethnography is reified in anthropological discourse, how it shaped her own fieldwork, and suggests a move to more inclusive “un-intrepid” methods. Similarly, Alana Ackerman (Ch 2) details her process of unlearning the glorification of in-person fieldwork as she sought methods that worked for her disabled body-mind. Ackerman calls for crippling ethnography by rethinking what counts as “being in the field.” Amanda Votta (Ch 3) unpacks the ableism inherent in university time, with its deadlines, class schedules, and funding models all tightly tied to the academic calendar. Votta examines the conflict between university and “pain time,” defined as the way “chronic pain shapes and reshapes the pace of life, the capacity, and the concerns of those who live on it” (62).

The collection also celebrates the methodological innovations of disabled ethnographers. Erin L. Durban and Miranda Joseph’s chapter details how collaborative cross-disability ethnography can make fieldwork more accessible. Their creative use of multiple modalities combined with the incorporation of access into the analysis process allowed students and professors alike to participate in ways that centered their respective access needs and strengths. Other chapters, such as those by Heidi Kelley and Kennen A. Betsalel (Ch 8) and Colligan (Ch 10), provide examples of what is often referred to as “disability expertise” (Hartblay 2020), detailing how non-normative body minds create new possibilities for connecting and engaging with participants. Kelley and Betsalel demonstrate how the changes in Kelley’s speech and movement after a stroke allowed them to see the way their Galician and Affrilachian interlocutors valued community and refused to “throw away” things, be they at the scale of sub-par cornbread or aging community members. Similarly, Colligan reflects on how her long career in the field examining embodied vulnerability served as a source of insight and allowed her to forge connections with her interlocutors.

Several chapters, most notably chapters 2, 3, and 9, build on critical disability studies’ reckoning with the particularities of chronic pain. These chapters point to the interplay between physical and psychological triggers for chronic pain flare as an example of the “leakiness” of bodies (44), and the blurred boundaries between the ethnographer and their interlocutors. Ackerman describes the way conducting fieldwork led to a relapse of her chronic pain condition:

“My pain was not a personal, individual experience contained within my own bodymind; it was triggered by the social environment within which I found myself. I had spent several months listening to refugees’ testimonies of horrifying persecution and violence...my body began responding to and incorporating the trauma I was witnessing” (44). Rachel Parks takes this insight in a slightly different direction, using her own experience of having chronic pain dismissed, as a way to understand the difficulties her interlocutors have in quantifying pain, and the impossibility of ever fully comprehending another’s experience of pain.

The volume also contributes to the anthropology of care and care work. Kim Fernandes (Ch 4) explores the grief and helplessness of conducting fieldwork with disabled people in India as a severe wave of COVID-19. She asks us to consider what ethical fieldwork and care look like in the midst of an unfolding crisis. Krisjon Rae Olson (Ch 6) uses her experience as the parent of a disabled child to inform her ethnography of parents' mutual support networks and the desire to seek care outside of formal institutions. Finally, in a deeply personal chapter, Susan Seizer (Ch 7) turns to ethnography as a way to process her own experience with multiple sclerosis, shifting care needs and the impact on relationships with her wife and family.

While this book is not a handbook or methods guide for how to conduct fieldwork as a disabled individual (nor does it pretend to be), it will likely appeal to instructors of methods courses and those mentoring graduate students. As a multiply-disabled anthropologist myself, this is the book I wish I had had before I embarked on fieldwork. I see disabled students and faculty turning to this volume for validation, as a source of collective wisdom, and a tool to articulate their experiences to colleagues, granting agencies, and committee members. For non-disabled scholars, the concluding mini-manifesto by Megan Moodie offers both tangible steps for allies and a call to join us in making anthropology a more accessible and humane discipline for all.

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