



Femme Object Somatics: Soul Candles, Glory Bowls, and the Crip Materiality of Overflow

Julia Havard and Rafi Ruffino Darrow

In this creative piece, the authors fantasize about supportive devices that hold what we cannot, weird vessels for collecting our crip femme excess, too-muchness, and overflow. Rafi Darrow imagines these vessels through a process dance piece and Jewish magic ritual sculpture where they transform HRT bottles into candles. Julia Havard creates hole-y humanoid ceramic containers that (fail to) hold liquid excess. Following theorists who note the harm of ableist metaphor, while highlighting metaphor's possibilities for creative intersectional representation (Schalk 2017, May and Ferri 2005), we archive strategies for politically grounded activist abstraction through autotheory that meditates on the object somatics of craft, when crafts become creatures, bridging body and object, user and monster.

Reader: We link this creative essay to Yiddishkeit, all the things that make up Ashkenazi Jewish culture, via the inclusion of blessings and language that calls in becoming as a practice. As a culture with a strong prayer tradition, blessings and curses play a formative role in Yiddish, indicated by a dedicated verb, *zoln*, translated as “may” or “should” (Piazza 2023). This call to our ancestors, blood and chosen, is used to transform the reading of this piece into a somatically engaged practice. As you move through this piece, we ask that you hold close a love you’ve lost, a crip ancestor, or one who is in need of healing.

Prayer for Beginning

Blessing: May our consciousnesses expand to witness our interconnectedness, ours and yours, reader, brought close by engaging in an exchange of language and the divine filling of its holes.

For the two co-creators of this piece, femme excess feels like our bodies are vessels experiencing overflow: our guts exceeding our borders, our too-much-ness rippling outward from our skin. Using a methodology we term “object somatics,” we explore the affective transfer from our bodies into objects, from objects to us. Across autotheory, craft, and choreography, we meditate on the materiality of femme excess and the generative qualities of abstraction and metaphor. By autotheory, we refer to the movement between embodied practice and theorization (Brostoff and Fournier 2021). Following Alyson Patsavas’ (2014) writing on the felt experience of leakage, we fantasize about a supportive device that holds what we cannot, a weird vessel for seepage, for collecting that which escapes us. Our parallel creative projects, undertaken within the same timeline across time zones and through a collage of voice memos, phone calls, photos, and texts, each center forms of craft with long and intertwined lineages.



I (Rafi) imagine these vessels with wax and glass, making a process dance piece out of an adapted Jewish magic practice, transforming HRT bottles into vessels for candles that evade usefulness, candles that live and melt and grieve outside of themselves. I (Julia) interpret these sculptures into ceramic vessels, rife with tentacles and holes, that hold and fail to hold liquid excess. We treat these therapeutic objects as support devices, related to the medical equipment we employ daily as disabled people, our animation overflowing into our assistive devices, vibrating as bodyparts (Belser 2016). Drawing on our crip powers and survivor alchemy of animating objects, we live into the excess of our Mad, developmentally disabled selves.

Prayer for Burning with the Dead

Blessing: May illness draw you closer to your ancestors, your experience of near-death like finger to a flame, alchemizing the grief and joy of chronic sickness—as fire transforms—destruction into connection. Skin to blister, like a world, full, in your hand.

I (Rafi) dance with red string, encircling my bed in the practice of *kneytlekh leygn*, a Yiddish women’s ritual of creating “soul candles” to connect to the power of ancestors and the potential of the prayers of the living. This work was traditionally done when the veil had thinned between the worlds of life and death, for example between the holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, or in times of widespread sickness. Traditionally the string is wrapped around a graveyard, “measuring” the space before laying the wicks of the candles in prayer. I instead measure my bed, a site, like the grave, of grief for so many chronically ill folks, a “resting place” of sorts where so many have been left to wait for COVID-safe space, or to die, during the ongoing pandemic.



Video 1: Rafi measures their bed with thread <https://vimeo.com/814700909>

Video Description: Rafi, a white trans disabled person with green and brown hair, and an open-front black shirt, measures the space with the thread, coaxing it from its folded skein. When they have lain the string all the way around the perimeter of the bed, they pull all of the string slowly off the bed and refold it.

In the ritual of *kneytlekh leygn*, the Candle of the Living (also called the Candle for the Healthy) is created along with Candle of the Dead (also called the Soul Candle). The association of life with health and the attendant corollary of death with illness/disability is something that in this pandemic world I feel in my bones. Supposedly already-almost-dead, precarity excuses social neglect, its fatal consequences seemingly inevitable. Being severely chronically ill, especially without proper care, feels dangerously close to dying, and sometimes is. That fear and finality has pulled me into the arms of my ancestors, into improvised crippled prayers and conversations with the dead.

Prayer for Holy Holes

Blessing: May entrance of these vials into the Glory Hole of the glass shop transform them into beautiful and curious shapes, cleansing them of the gatekeeping and capitalist greed that dominates the pharmaceutical industry that we might reclaim them as tools of mourning, transformation, and divine light. May the open space through which we encounter intimacy be bounded in the ways we desire and consent to.



Figure 1: Photograph of a dozen small glass vials in various stages of melting and transforming.

Glass moves like it's alive, flows towards you easily, threatening the edges of your body with its heat, movement ever-changing and unpredictable as it hardens in the cool air. The threat of holding creeps towards you, heat along the metal rod. Will you touch the hot end of the pole? The heat that destroys also connects, melding pieces even while it desolidifies the structure of the glass itself. Only as it threatens to disappear its shape altogether, is it malleable enough to stick to another. Bodies with porous edges flowing into one another, borders swirling.



The term “glory hole” has its origins in glassblowing in the early 19th century, referring to the hole through which sand would enter the two thousand degree furnace where it would be shaped into glass (Murphy 2019). The phrase linked such holes to their visual impact, noting the relationship between the effect of the light from the furnace and “The Glory” that glowed off of the heads of saints and angels in paintings.

Entering the mouth of the glory hole one destroys and creates, pushing the liquid-solid into becoming, melted edges melding with others, no longer itself but something else, threatening to fall in on the multiplicity of its meetings. Glass holds the memory of its former state, witness to its past as well as the future state it could become again, liquidity as unpredictability. When I (Rafi) finished each consecutive testosterone vial, I couldn’t bring myself to throw it out, to waste its witness of all it had taken for them to get there: the medical gatekeeping and distrust, the years of shame and dysphoria. In the wake of so many recent anti-trans bills, the bottles feel even more precious, a privilege even more than before, to have obtained them at all.

“Glory hole” is first recorded as gay slang in 1949, defined as a “phallic size hole in partition between toilet booths” in Swasarnt Nerf’s *Gay Girl’s Guide* (cited in Murphy 2019). Indubitably, as the rise of industrialization facilitated crowds of men working in glass shops, the slang use of “glory hole” likely developed from associations with the boiling hot meeting point where one substance transmuted into another across a shimmering affective halo. Currently, as an international effort to preserve glory holes as historic artifacts continues (Gremore 2018), these sneaky openings are experiencing a rise in present popularity due to their COVID-transmission prevention qualities (Ashford and Longstaff 2021). Glory holes exist in relationship to the erotics of public health, a disability orientation to casual intimacy, sexual boundaries, harm-reduction, and kinky perversity.



Video 2: Glory hole in the glass shop

<https://vimeo.com/814699077>

Video description: Standing before the camera is a glory hole, the cube oven made from bricks, with a metal-surrounded hole inside that glows bright red-orange with fire. A metal rod is guided in and out of the hole by a pair of white hands.

Prayer for Functional Dysfunction

Blessing: May your dysfunction be lavish, forever a celebration of finding new uses.

Beginning with the idea of creating vessels for excess, I (Julia) began thwarting the inevitability of overflow by creating purposeful holes in dishware, functional vessels made for dysfunction. My “Glory Bowls” evolved to grow tentacles, fingers, tongues, and assholes, built for (irregular) use. Glory Bowls can be entered with an appendage, snack, or device. Some bowls can be lifted up using their holes, whereas some of the holes are puckered assholes, frozen in time before being coaxed open enough to grip.



Figure 2: Bowl glazed in murky red, green, and brown is pierced through the sides with two golf ball-sized holes.



Figure 3: Bowl with two tongues as handles shooting off of its rim. The sides are pierced with holes, surrounded by puffy blue lips, the sides of the pot decorated with bright lines and squiggles of underglaze in yellow, orange, grey, and dark green.

The above bowl (Fig. 3) allows the user to hold its tongues at the rim to lift or to enter the bowl through the painted lips that surround an open mouth, suggesting that the alimentary canal is the glory hole of the body, penetrable from either side. Users of glory holes in bathroom stalls used to stick a tongue or a finger through the hole to invite a partner from the other side of the wall. What does a finger through this bowl's hole flag for? What does it invite?



Figure 4: Ceramic hands reach up from a blue-glazed donut-shaped closed form with a hole at the center, catching the light of the sunset behind them. The form stands on a ledge surrounded by a pothos plant and with green hills in the background behind the window.

Prayers for Leakage

Blessing: May our ancestors touch us through the glory hole of prayer, this passageway that begs to be filled by the material of our spirit-body-minds as they are entangled with those who came before, linking us through that place of rest, eating, work, fucking, love, and life- the bed- that can also be our grave.

The *Asher Yatzar* everyday morning prayer states: “Blessed are You, God of the Universe, Who formed humans with wisdom and created many openings and cavities within him. [...] If any one of them were closed or if one of any one of them were opened, it would be impossible to exist” (*Shacharit*, Koren Siddur).

But *our* crip trans goddex knows that existence is possible where closed holes open, where open holes are closed. Ze knows that our fluids have their own sacred knowledge, that excess is not representative of failure and that incontinence, drool, regurgitation, blood, infection, cum, snot, tears are not channels of shame but rather rivers that stir the veil and force us to build resources that the abled lack.



Video 3: Rafi places thread in mouth <https://vimeo.com/814701530>

Video description: Rafi balls up the red thread gently and traces their top surgery scars with it. Closing their eyes, they take the string inside their mouth, holding it there before peeling it slowly off their tongue, eyes still closed, ecstatic. They drag the last long string slowly, wetly from them, deep breath, pulling the spit-covered string to trail down their round stomach. Finally out of their mouth, they pull the string along their face, letting it propel them into a dance with the string, a pas de deux of feeling, partnering with the weight of their body. They swirl the wet string around their body, like a lasso, like a bow and arrow, something heavy and twirling.

When I (Rafi) place the ball of red thread in my mouth, I link themes of consumption to the marking of queer and trans crip graves. I am still, holding the tangled thread in my mouth, my main choreography invisible as saliva seeps into the thread from my tongue. The thread, having measured the bed grave, holds the memory of being wrapped around a representation of the site of death. I memorialize the crip bed as a way of remembering the sick and disabled life and death that occurs in bed, of those incarcerated and institutionalized and their loss of life in the bed as grave.

Prayer for Material Metaphor

Blessing: May we use metaphor with care and specificity, that it might enliven our experience of mundanity, sickness, and pain, illuminating it toward the purposes of art and justice.

Metaphor is the portal between words and beings, the glory hole between body and text. “Metaphor” came into use in fifteenth century French and originated from the Greek *metapherein*, meaning “to transfer” (*Oxford English Dictionary*, Accessed March 2024). When metaphor is applied with specificity, it initiates a transfer, a sense of contagion, word sticking to thing. Our bodies interact with our metaphorical materials, that is, materials that hold the histories of trans-ing our bodies, that show the scars of our bodies’ work upon them through touch and pressure, through use and misuse, from the fire that transforms candles to liquid and

to the water that quenches us through vessels, we become a part of each other's transformation.



Video 4: Rafi's soul candles burning <https://vimeo.com/814699767>

Video description: Candles made from wax-filled testosterone bottles fill a small black tablecloth-covered table. The candles are arranged as a sculpture, some made from distorted glass, others from half sized bottles, stacked and placed around each other. Connecting the bottles is the red thread, dragging between vials as they burn. In some places it is on fire itself. The camera swoops in and out, peeking at the candles from different angles.

As Omise'eke Tinsley (2008) parses, metaphors of queer liberation through queer fluidity are not always simple for queers of color, but rather loaded, complex, and textured, given, for example, the materiality of liquidity for Black bodies in the form of the middle passage, of the spilled blood of torture and the water of drowning deaths. We long to ground the metaphors of excess and overflow with material, following Tinsley's impetus that we "return to the materiality of water to make its metaphors mean more complexly" (2008, 212). Some Disability Studies theorists have noted the damage of disability as metaphor in cultural texts (Mitchell and Snyder 2001). Others note the negative impact of ableist metaphor, while lifting up the possibilities for creative intersectional representation through metaphor (May and Ferri 2005; Schalk 2013). As dancers with the connective tissue disorder Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome, we are familiar with the materiality of connection and rupture and welcome the stretch of layers of meaning.

Eli Tareq El Bechelany-Lynch articulates in their book *Knot Body* (2020):

We can either talk about illness bluntly, in plain words, or address the pain metaphorically, or even, surprisingly, in beautiful ways. Is it too hard to believe in this multiplicity while bent over the toilet, throwing up the ache in your stomach? We retch and retch and the pain doesn't fade; it transforms. (21)

Bechelany-Lynch describes the physical urgency and necessity of metaphor when speaking of pain, and the beauty that can result from such imaginative work. Through the image of regurgitation into the toilet, Bechelany-Lynch cites the embodiment of metaphor, the body doing the work of metaphor, a tool of transformation, even as it is a site of abjection.

Prayer for Grief and Hope

Blessing: May you live in the liminality of disability and trans identity, coming to hold and be held by the ways mourning has transformed your body into a dynamic dance partner of pain.

Disabled bodies are a site where boundaries thin, porousness and abjection forming the contours of unsure shared forms. Soul candle-making is a methodology for this unboundedness to converge upon connection, the grave-bed illuminated as portal.

Feldmesterin (Yiddish word for a woman hired to perform *kneytlekh leygn*), Gitele the Gabete of Koriv prayed, as she measured the cemetery in order to care for a sick child:

Raboyne shel oylem, azoy vi mir beyde hobn getsoygn dem fodem mit undzer gantsn koyekh, un der fodem iz nisht ibergerisn gevorn, azoy zoln botl vern ale beyze koykhes. Dem tayern kinds lebn zol kholile nisht ibergerisn vern. (Cohen, 4)

Master of the universe, since we both pulled the thread with all our power, and the thread was not broken, shall all evil powers come to naught. The [dear child's] life shall not— God forbid—be cut short.

As a grief ritual, *kneytlekh leygn* is meant to protect the living as well as illuminate the ancestors and communicate with the dead, a nonbinary tool for holding our in-betweenness.



Video 5: Rafi singing <https://vimeo.com/814701302>

Video description: Rafi pulls the string taut, letting it guide them in jolts around the space. An undulation pulls them down into a lunge, pulling the string long. They caress the long string, dripping down their body. With big handfuls of red string in each hand, they begin to rock back and forth. Clutching the thread, they kiss each full fist, presenting their palms with eyes closed, breathing deeply. Stooping over, chest scars becoming more prominent in the crease of their naked torso, they shake their fists, letting the vibration spread through their whole body, throat and open mouth as they begin to rock again. Eyes opening and legs straightening, they stand and draw perpendicular lines through the space, using the string to stretch red shapes in the air.



I (Julia) started throwing pots a few months before my father died. As I dealt with the ripples of his death and the pain of the never-healed rift between us, the cool cave-like studio and wet soft clay, the straightforward task that took all of my concentration, comforted me. I learned after my first pots were glazed and fired that my father used to teach ceramics to neurodivergent young people. I did not know that he also had sat down at the wheel, grounded himself and created usable dysfunctional objects of his own. Throwing caught me in that grief and taught me that there are nonlinear ways to remember, to love those who have passed in the present.

Prayer for Broken Crafts

Blessing: May our divine practices of femme craft link us to our ancestors who ensured the survival of loved ones through collective care practices. May we invite leakage, drips, cracks, and fractures. May the seepage across the borders of our bodies remind us of our interconnectedness, our need for each other across difference.

Craft is made of imperfections: a dropped stitch, a drip off the side of a page. Evading the capitalist perfectionism that dominates art worlds, this form, widely feminized and thus barely considered an art, has been claimed and reclaimed in disability practice and performance, embracing the magnificence of imperfection as a quality of craft as art.

In my (Rafi's) dance practice, I employ chance in ways that diverge from the traditional chance structures of contemporary dance (which sometimes invite arbitrary randomness by, for example, rolling dice to determine which choreographic sequence to dance), to view disabled chance practices and gestures as relevant sites from which to choreograph. In this way, the twitch, the trip, the stim, and the drool become important impetuses of movement instead of mistakes inevitable to the disabled body. Integrating these movements into choreography mark them as not purposeful, but important and potentially beautiful, worthy of being seen.

In my (Julia's) practice, the imperfections of the body are reflected in the shape of the pot. To throw a pot: elbows brace against thighs, muscles engage at the center. Movement of the body creates the shape, so that imperfect movement wobbles walls and creates ridges and waves. My teacher, Cynthia Cummings-Birch, encourages her students to continue working on pieces that are imperfect rather than throwing them away, hand-building bottoms of pots that rip, integrating asymmetry into design, filling cracks with a salve made out of toilet paper and slip. I salvaged the weirdos, such as that pictured in Figure 5, a floating vessel with fringed rims like sea creatures floating their pink underbellies and unexpected skins.



Figure 5: A blue vase with a pink ruffy rim. Its pink tentacles curl out from its sides and a small mini-bowl or tongue emerges out of the bottom of the base. Brown-ish veins mar the surface of the pot.

Those of us with bodyminds that are “broken,” sick, and stigmatized can often locate the beauty and resources present in fracture. We invite drips and cracks. How can we be held in our hole-iness? What shifts in our body vessels when we treat our holes as holy?



Figure 6: Wax leaks out of the mutated glass of the Soul Candle, its red wick bubbling up like liquid.

As dance scholar Anthea Kraut (2015) notes, the idea that the borders of the body are fixed and bounded is an idea grounded in white supremacy. A central tenet of whiteness understands white bodies as having impenetrable borders, while the borders of racialized bodies are constructed as weaker and penetrable, a belief that contributes to racist violence and cultural appropriation. Jewishness represents an uneasy liminal space within and outside of whiteness as it is often associated with whiteness in the United States, despite vast racial diversity within Jewish communities. Though (and perhaps because) many American Jews benefit from white privilege, Jews are also always already considered toxic, dangerous, and other by white supremacists. Within the cultural specificity of our diasporic Jewish identities, we connect to this ritual of crossing bounded bodies, an illumination of the in-between and the not yet.

Prayer for Boners and Bones

Blessing: May the leakage of your body remind you of our unboundedness, our lack of control. May you embrace the pleasure of this out-of-hand-ness for the sake of itself, sacred beauty of the unclosed.

I (Julia) and my partner Elya helped Cynthia create the glaze, Orange Street, a coppery-reddish brown with a golden glow that now encrypts the puckered assholes of the bowl below (Fig. 7). The recipe called for 250 grams of Bone Ash, the animal bones that are remade to form products such as “bone china.” The burnt bones give the wet glaze its sour musky smell. My fingernails have been tinged dark red for a week now, bones in the crevices of my skin. This glory bowl glows golden with bodies, glazed with ingredients made from death, the bone ash of the glaze linking the glory and grief of the ways that the anus holds cultural meaning: the fear of death that became bound with gay sex during the AIDS epidemic, the lack of a repronormative future that queer fucking represents.

In locating the asshole as pleasurable aesthetically as well as erotically, we aestheticize an alternative to heteronormative futures. Jennifer Nash discusses the anus as a “representational passageway” through which a viewer of porn can access racially marked spaces, the ass acting as a portal that is imbued with the racialized erotics of desire for the other (2014, 448). Thus, assholes are both indicators of non-repronormative sexuality but also as openings enriched by bodily specificity.

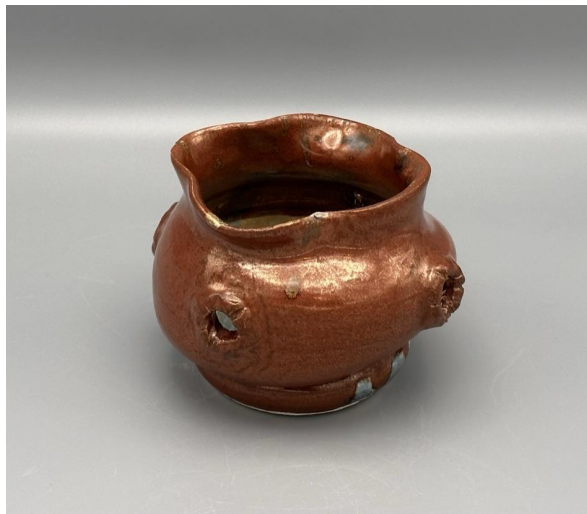


Figure 7: Bright copper bowl with a golden hue. Its top opens in a wavy flower, and its sides are punctuated by four puckered assholes. Through the assholes we get a glimpse of a soft green glaze that coats the inside of the bowl.



Figure 8 and 9: Figure 8, to the right, is the top view of a donut-shaped vessel that stands on two flexed hands. The top view shows the open asshole that functions as the small opening to the vase. The vessel is photographed against a green lawn. Figure 9, above, is the side view of the same vessel, also photographed on mowed grass. From this angle, we see the green, purple glaze that drip across the top and bottom of the vase, and the matte-black stripe across the



Prayers for the Caress of Objects

Blessing: May these objects hold you as you hold them.

As crips, we find gloriously and hilariously unexpected uses for our bodies, ways to create and give pleasure. In our collective crip deficit of care, we wonder, how can a body receive pleasure from a bowl? I (Julia) wanted the user's body to fit amongst and within the bodies sculpted onto the vessels. The "hand-les" of the mugs reach outward toward the user and hang flamboyantly limp. A user must enter the hand (in whatever way and with whatever body part they choose), holding the hand that the vessel holds. In this series of pieces, the user caresses and is caressed, cupping the gaping hole of the mug.



Figure 10: A matte-black short mug with a flared rim extends a small loose hand as hand-le.



Figure 11: A medium-sized mug, half-covered with shiny-red glaze while the other half features a limp-wristed hand-le that elegantly drapes down toward the table, a murky greenish-blue.



Figure 12: A sea of soul candles, HRT bottles, red thread, and wax drippings.

As the candles burn low and cause the strings to catch and sizzle into breaking, we hold the moments of rupture in our throats and say a blessing for endings that are also beginnings, like a limp that through repetition wears a hole in the shoe, like a mouth that opens up to kiss the earth.

Blessing: May the fraying connect us.

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