**What Drives Work: A Written Performance Piece**

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**Abstract**

This creative non-fiction piece recounts the vicissitudes of being a disabled, black, female professor in the academy.

My performance today is supposed to talk about my embodiment as a disabled black woman within the academy. I am keenly aware that my body is always on display, spectacularized and stared at, questioned in public spaces and understood as generally aberrant within larger public discourse. The stare is a regulatory practice designed to interrogate and discipline unruly bodies into being or behaving according to standards of normalcy. I am always object to a gaze. In short, my body often performs without consent. Here, I subject myself to this gaze willingly. This presentation, this performance, is not only consensual, but invitational for those who wish to engage me on terms appropriate for my experience. Please obey all stage directions in brackets if you can.

Before I begin, I want to be clear about my terms. I make a distinction between the physiological and cognitive circumstances of impairment [lift left hand with a flourish] and the complex institutional and cultural practices that sustain and create disability as a social identity [lift right hand with a flourish]. Impairment is a physical or cognitive difference. [Push left hand left.] Disability is what makes those differences matter. [Push right hand right.] To use an example, a wheelchair user is impaired. It is only when that wheelchair user encounters stairs does that person become disabled. [Put both hands down.]

In what follows, I desire to link my individual story to a larger set of concerns within the academy. As Disability Studies scholars, Nirmala Erevelles and Lennard Davis warn, individualized and sentimentalized stories shunt aside the significance of the context in which they are produced. What I am

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1 This was performed at the 2013 Ford Fellows Conference in Washington, D.C. where I was invited to discuss the intersection of race, disability, and gender. I appreciate my lively and engaged audience and my co-panelists: Mark Broomfield, Cornelius Carter, and Rhacel Parrenas.

2 Because of the genre of this piece (creative nonfiction), I have chosen to relegate my minimal engagement with academic literature to the footnotes. Please engage on the terms most useful and appropriate for your current moment. I have chosen only to highlight the scholars that I reference specifically though there may be many more whose work is surely in dialogue with my own.

3 See Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Staring: How We Look* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009). Garland-Thomson notes the disciplinary nature of the stare as well as its desire to regulate that which falls outside the boundaries of normalcy. She discusses this in terms related specifically to disability, but it most certainly has an applicability to multiple identity categories. I deploy the stare here as a way to entice reader/audience to engage in staring at my body and the social categories inscribed on it: Black, woman, disabled.

4 The common phrase is “subject to” as a way to denote the adjective use of the word, “subject,” which means that one is under domination, control, or influence. I have chosen to use “object” here to point out how the gaze often strips me of the philosophical nominal meaning of “subject” which denotes that one is a thinking, feeling individual.

5 I realize that my specific disability might be of note here. I do not wish to disclose. It is perhaps important for this piece to note that I can pass for non-disabled when not using my motorized scooter. For the purposes of this performance, reader/audience members should envision me sitting in a scooter.

6 These are not the only scholars to note this particular phenomenon, but I have cited them for their import to the field. Lennard Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (London: Verso, 1995); Nirmala Erevelles, *Disability and Difference in Global Contexts: Enabling a Transformative Body Politic* (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011).
about to tell you is neither sentimental nor individual for that reason. Part of the story is about access. What does one do when the literal doors of opportunity are shut or closed off by the presence of stairs or other obstructions? How does a scholar of African American literature react when she, while teaching Jim Crow, can only enter the back of her building? It is the only “accessible” entrance. [Use obnoxious air quotes.] The other part of the story is about the pleasures and difficulties of work within this context. How does one find intellectual sustenance in the arid climate caused by a lack of access?

Recently, I published an article in Disability Studies Quarterly entitled “‘It’s a Jungle Out There’: Race and Disability in Monk.” In it, I examine USA Network’s hit series, Monk, finding that the unnamed disability of the titular character creates tension with other characters’ blackness. Monk follows the life of crime-solving genius Adrian Monk as he navigates his world while dealing with what the show hints [Emphasize next two words.] might be obsessive-compulsive disorder. The drama-comedy relies on humor to diffuse this tension, invoking stock figures like the angry Black man, Mammy, and the murderous hip-hop star. I argue that Monk reveals a complex interplay between narratives of blackness, disability, and white liberalism. Specifically, these awkward exchanges open up the space to see that we read disabled and racial identities in contact according to a set of logics determined by ability and by race.

This article came to be while I was a Visiting Assistant Professor at Pitzer College in Claremont, California. As some of us know all too well, the academy is much like the army. You go where you are sent until you are ranked high enough to demand a specific location. [Speak in a grave voice.] (Even then, your choices can still be limited.) While I was being all that I could be at Pitzer, it was lonely. [Pause and look up.] Here, I cannot avoid individualizing my story. I must say that I did not have a partner, nor children. That certainly would have changed the experience.

This story begins like most auspicious, epiphanic occasions. It was winter in Claremont, which meant that it was raining. I was nearing the completion of my year, and I had just accepted a position at Bates College in Maine. As I recall, we had not had real celebrations for my achievement, because everyone was busy. There were certainly hearty congratulations and lots of cheers from the distant disembodied voices over the phone. I busied myself with class preparation and revisions for another article, but had no real social life to speak of.

This profession requires that you spend a significant amount of time alone, whether in the stacks of the library, in front of your computer, or in a lab. The solitude seems to be an expected part of the profession, but the loneliness can catch you by surprise. It is difficult to talk about the affective experience of loneliness without soliciting a significant amount of pity. [Roll your eyes.] I want to bypass that particular reaction because the fact is the loneliness that I experienced was, in part, structured by the institution. A visiting position inheres a certain amount of tenuousness. It is difficult to build sustainable and deep relationships in a year’s time, especially since what looms large is the possibility of your departure. The substantial friendships that I did build from my time in Claremont took time. Quite frankly, time is a luxury one does not seem to have during the year of a visiting position. Part of the reason for this temporal constraint is that you are busying yourself with [Tick off the following points on your fingers.] the job application season, the struggle to produce more pages, and the responsibilities of your daily work. Combine this with the constraints of others’ work and lives, and you have a recipe for [Punctuate each of the following words with a pause.] a full life of vacuity.

My affective experience was also buttressed by the institutional and cultural structures that shape and create disability. I was constrained by a lack of access to public transportation, severely limiting my social options outside of the college. Public transport for the disabled barely allows for anything outside of doctors’ appointments. I was scarcely allowed to go grocery shopping while using para-transit services, let alone go to a bowling alley or a friend’s home. The price of taxis in Southern California makes social interaction cost prohibitive. The same logic [Say “the very same.” Repeat “the same.”] that undergirds the para-transit system as an institution also underlies the logic of social attitudes. The “ideology of ability”7 and the “hegemony of normalcy”8 function to exclude the disabled from citizenship, public space, and, in

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8 Davis, 49.
a more mundane and perhaps more painful way, human interaction generally. These ideologies
presuppose not only that standards of normalcy are unequivocally valid and useful, but also that those standards should determine how we allocate fiscal, material, and human resources. For the para-transit system, that meant that they would only allocate their resources for me to do activities that they deemed acceptable, like going to the doctor’s office. Within friendships, worshipping at the altar of normalcy means that one has to prove one’s worth and value based on one’s labor. In short, I could only ask for favors after I had earned the right to do so by editing and reading papers or by extending a listening ear for others’ problems. The system of exchange is not always clear, and certainly people are embarrassed if I dare say anything. Yet, it undergirds interaction with people. One person did have the temerity to say that my intellectual labor of editing fellowship applications was simply not commensurate with her physical labor of driving us to certain locations or her driving to visit. This person’s logic ignored the fact that a proofreader who assists with a [Pronounce every syllable of the next word.] successful fellowship application helps secure the money that puts gas in someone’s car.

To my mind, this brings up the larger issue of work/life balance in the academy. This seems to be the only profession where we expect our colleagues will be friends, but we invest precious little time in getting to know them as people. How often do we make time for friendships? Why are those friendships seen in utilitarian terms? Instead, we think of them as commodities within an exchange of mentorships, fellowships, or apprenticeships. What exactly have we exchanged in our pursuit of tenure? What will we regret once we realize that tenure is not all there is? For those who do not subscribe to the system of exchange, it is important to consider how we address the problem of work/life balance because our approach to the issue also seems to be [Say “is.”] undergirded by the ideology of ability. Specifically, we expect production and exalt the productive regardless of the ablest modes required to produce. Few scholars take deliberate steps to ensure that one’s work does not constrain one’s life. This is not peculiar to the ultra-competitive halls of “Research One Universities,” nor is it specific to the provinciality of a small liberal arts college. Our profession fetishizes production – be it pedagogical or research oriented – without caring about the embodied realities of those who produce. Despite the lamentation and handwringing about a lack of work/life balance in the academy, many scholars refuse to acknowledge that our understanding of this work leaves no room for any kind of life.

During my winter months in Claremont, the confluence of the visiting professorship and various disabling practices opened up the space for me to watch more television. I turned to Netflix for a show I could watch without interruption and I found Monk. It became something of an obsession for me as it provided laughter and scripted drama-comedy. But, it became work fairly quickly. I began to see that race, generally, blackness, specifically, and disability were illegible to each other within the context of the show. I wanted to understand how blackness was always configured as able-bodied and disability always configured as a (white) problem. I wondered whether there was space to view them differently. To paraphrase and remix Audre Lorde, Isaac Julien and Stevie Wonder, I was looking for my disabled Langstons, my disabled black role models to help sing a litany of survival in the key of my life.

So, I set to work. The process of creating an article is not all that glamorous. This may be the most boring part of my performance, but it is the space where and when I re-invite you to take a look because this is perhaps some of the most important advice I can offer. I worked on the article every day because,

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9 In the cultural practice of African American vernacular, this signifies on the title of Issac Julien’s film Looking for Langston which seeks to create a series of impressions about the recalcitrant queer history of 1920s Harlem. The Langston, here, refers to famed Black author, Langston Hughes.

10 I signify. Here, I point to Audre Lorde’s lamentation in The Cancer Journals that there were no black lesbian feminists with cancer for her to look to as role models.

11 I signify. Here, I point to Audre Lorde’s poem “A Litany for Survival” and the film about her life that bears the same name.

12 I signify on Stevie Wonder because he is also Black and disabled. His album Songs in the Key Life is one of my favorites. For literature on the particularities of Black and blind musicians, see Terry Rowden, Songs of Blind Folk: African American Musicians and the Cultures of Blindness (Ann Arbor, MI: U of Michigan Press, 2009)
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in the words of my favorite drag queens, I am a professional.\textsuperscript{13} And, [Peer over the rims of your glasses (real or imagined).] I came to \textit{werg}.\textsuperscript{14} My writing time was an appointment I refused to give up to anyone. To be clear, writing and research took many forms: re-watching an episode, free writing on a scene, editing a close reading, putting together a bibliography, reading an article, or suturing my argument to my evidence. I worked at least for 30 to 60 minutes a day. On non-teaching days, I stole more time. (Actually one of the joys of a visiting position can be that you are not obligated to do service, so you can spend whole days in your pajamas working.) I scheduled my writing time as though it were sacred, because it was. There is nothing more crucial I can tell you about the process of creating work, than the importance of sitting down and doing the work. Do not wait for the muses to inspire you. Do not wait for someone to spark you. Do not languish in reading as though you don’t have to write. [Say the next phrase with the deadpan intonation of RuPaul.] Work inspires work. [Repeat.] And as we know, when it comes to the study of race, gender, sexuality, class, gender presentation, disability, and all the –isms that should be wasms,\textsuperscript{15} there is always more work to do.

I would love to tell you that I submitted the article and received an acceptance straightaway. But, that is often not the case. It was rejected first. The anonymous first reviewer said that "much of what is written here is too large grained to be truly useful. The media analysis seems unaware of close reading of the practice, or chooses not to practice it."\textsuperscript{16} As you can imagine, the reviewer had more to say. According to this reviewer, my treatment of race and disability was cursory and that I should write as though scholarship had already addressed the issue thoroughly. I took heed of the reviewer’s comments and engaged the scholarly treatment of race and disability more rigorously. Even if I did not agree with the reviewer’s assessment of my work, I do subscribe to the mother wit axiom, “Ain’t nothin’ to it but to do it.” [Tilt head to the side.] Truth be told, I did little revision to that version of the article and just sent it to \textit{Disability Studies Quarterly}. By that point, I was ensconced in Maine and was participating a writing group. My needs for community were met more deeply there, in part because I was a tenure-track professor. Many of the constraints that I faced in Claremont had disappeared, though deep friendships were and are still developing and emerging. During that rejection, I could rely on my very supportive writing group who reminded me that my urgently personal article was also publishable.

I would like to point out that this "happy ending" should not conjure the oft referred to images of impaired people overcoming barriers or being super-cripples who should be congratulated merely for living. Instead, stare at this story within the parameters appropriate to it. [Lean forward.] This is about living through the arduous impositions of a system designed for others, and the repercussions of those ignorant to its architecture. There is no way to tell the story of my article without the circumstances that created it, few of which were pleasurable. In other words, existence, production, execution within the academy is [Raise volume of voice for the next word.] not a teleological enterprise. It matters [Emphasize each phrase by pausing more than one beat at each comma.] what roads we travel down, how rocky they are, and who gets to travel with us. The fact is that seeing my article in print was bittersweet. It reminded me of a time of my life when I was profoundly lonely. I think also of the people for whom this is a present reality, because their embodiment makes it difficult or [Say “damn near.”] impossible to find the nourishment they need to do the work they want to do or find the pleasure they desire. This article was produced partially because of my naturally bookish tendency and my inclination to dive into work. I am well aware that not everyone has work as a respite, but that isn’t their problem. In fact, it isn’t a problem


\textsuperscript{15} Kenneth Ulmer of Faithful Central Baptist Church in Los Angeles said this during a sermon. He referenced all “isms” like sexism, racism, ableism and his humor relies on the present tense of the verb “to be” embedded in “ism.” He turns the phrase based on this embedded verb to create “was-m” as an indicator that he (and I) believes that these “isms” should go away.

\textsuperscript{16} David Bolt, email message to author, February 16, 2012. David Bolt is not the anonymous reviewer, but the editor of the magazine to which I originally submitted my article.
at all. [Pause.] The problem is that there are constraints they face that affect us all. Lest we be seduced into thinking that the creation of work is reason enough to ignore barriers and inaccessibility, I would like to state categorically that my performance is not brought to you by the letter “C” for “complacency.”\textsuperscript{17} As we build a new academy and touch the world alongside and through students, other faculty, and staff [Repeat “and staff.”], we must open up the space for people to be, to be as fully as they can.

\textsuperscript{17} I signify on the popular children’s television show\textit{ Sesame Street} which featured “Brought to You by the Letter” to help viewers learn their alphabet.