

More than Just Funny: Reading Galloway from a Disability Perspective

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In *Just the Funny Bits*, Galloway opens this collection of excerpts from her one-woman show *Out All Night and Lost My Shoes* (directed and dramaturged by Donna Marie Nudd) by telling her audience that there is a hidden subtext in this video, that she's deaf. Clearly, she exaggerates the extent to which her deafness remains hidden, since she describes right off the bat how medical experimentation on her pregnant mother resulted in deafness and mental illness in her unborn daughter, Terry. The rest of this painfully funny monologue describes an adolescence as a deaf, hallucinatory girl that inaugurated an adulthood riddled with suicidal tendencies, paranoia, and schizophrenia—topics that the remaining three excerpts take up in succession. In these excerpts, deafness as disability indeed recedes into subtext, but it continues to “read” loud and clear to me. For me, this work is primarily about deafness as disability—disability as unique perspective on the world, as aesthetic, and as a politic. But it could just as easily be “about” femaleness and queerness. What makes Galloway's work so rich is precisely that it can be about so many things simultaneously and remain focused. My reading, though, will be unashamedly overdetermined by a disability perspective. I am a disabled theatre artist, scholar, and activist who writes about disability and performance. Galloway and I are close friends and collaborators. Living in Tallahassee, Florida, we find ourselves outside the heart of the disability art and culture movement (places like Chicago, Berkeley, and New York), so we have gravitated to one another to share our perspectives on disability issues and collaborate

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on disability-related projects. She and I have traveled together to perform or give talks at disability events, including *Out All Night and Lost My Shoes*, which was most recently performed at the Chicago Festival of Disability Arts and Culture in April of 2006. Given our relationship, I can't even think about Galloway without thinking about disability politics.

I have also done a close reading of both the text and performance of *Out All Night and Lost My Shoes* for *Gay and Lesbian Quarterly*. In particular, I explored how Galloway uses her queer and disabled identity affiliations to critique both communities. I looked at how Galloway makes this critique by "queering" representations of disability and "cripping" representations of queerness. I wrote:

Queering describes the practices of putting a spin on mainstream representations to reveal latent queer subtext; appropriating a representation for one's own purposes, forcing it to signify differently; or deconstructing a representation's heterosexism. Similar to queering, some disabled people practice what I call "cripping." Crippling spins mainstream representations or practices to reveal their able-bodied assumptions and exclusionary effects. Both queering and crippling reveal the arbitrary delineation between what is considered normal and what is defective and the negative social ramifications of attempts to homogenize humanity. And both disarm what is painful with wicked humor, including camp.¹

By using *crip* humor to critique queerness and queer humor to critique disability, Galloway comments upon the exclusionary practices of both communities. Interestingly, my earlier analysis of the full-length performance focused on only one of the four "funny bits" excerpted in the video: the opening monologue. In preparing to respond to the video of *Just the Funny Bits*, I've realized that I originally neglected these other bits because deafness-as-disability is indeed more subtextual in them than in the rest of the show. Even mental-illness-as-disability can be obscured in the urge to transform

¹ Sandahl, Carrie. "Queering the Crip or Crippling the Queer?: Intersections of Queer and Crip Identities in Solo Autobiographical Performance." *Gay and Lesbian Quarterly* 9.1-2 (2003): 36.

the lived experience of this condition into a metaphor for living in a postmodern world. In my earlier essay, I looked at Galloway's work specifically for points of intersectionality of queerness and disability. In this essay, I'd like instead to articulate an overtly disability-specific reading of the three additional excerpts from the video that might not be as legible to those outside a disability experience.

The second excerpt in *Funny Bits*, "An Etiquette of Suicide," also appears in John Killacky and Larry Connolly's video *Crip Shots* (2001), which is a compilation of "performative portraits" of disabled artists' work.² I have probably seen this excerpt a hundred times, since I show *Crip Shots* frequently to provide a sampling of different disability performances when I'm teaching or giving guest lectures. I've been in audiences comprised of mostly disabled people, and I've been in audiences where I'm the only "out" disabled person. Regardless of the audience, the scene always draws hearty, if uncomfortable, laughter. For disabled audience members, the laughter is cathartic. While non-disabled audience members tend to remark on this piece as a discomfiting "black"-humor treatment of suicide or an irreverent parody of "society ladies" with hidden malevolence, many disabled audience members understand this excerpt as a dramatization of American society's "better dead than disabled" mentality. Disabled people often interpret this scene as Galloway's commentary on historical and current-day eugenics policies, the financial and emotional burden of disability on family members and friends, physician-assisted suicide, and euthanasia. Conversation sparked by this excerpt became especially heated when battles in the courts and on the streets over Terri Schiavo's fate were at their height. So, when I watch this scene excerpted in *Funny Bits*, these life and death conversations with other disabled people about the pressure to "end one's life when all has ended" become text, rather than subtext.

"Moments of Near Suspense" is the third excerpt and focuses on a paranoid episode of Galloway's life when she feared that someone was out to kill her. Everyday tasks become nightmarish as she

² Each video records a different performance of "Etiquette of Suicide," so they're not exactly the same.

anticipates death at every turn and is suspicious of everything and everyone. For me, this scene illustrates an aspect of the lived experience of deafness—the experience of not having direct access to what is being said or what is going on in the hearing world. Paranoia becomes a tactic for survival, and one must be leery of the hearing world’s representation of reality. The recently released documentary *Audism Unveiled* (2005) created by H-Dirksen Bauman and his Deaf Studies students at Gallaudet University helps explain how such paranoia results from the effects of “audism,” which is the prejudice and bias deaf people experience in the hearing world. Deaf interviewees describe growing up isolated in hearing families where they were never quite sure what was going on. Several of the interviewees repeat remarkably similar anecdotes about being the sole deaf person in a group of hearing people, often family members or close friends, and being left out of a shared experience of laughter. When the deaf person asks why everyone is laughing, otherwise well-meaning family or friends say “never mind” or “it wasn’t important,” thus taking away the right of deaf people to decide for themselves what matters and what doesn’t, leaving them out of important moments of social bonding, and fomenting paranoia that they themselves may be the butt of the joke.³ The experience of being left out and not knowing what’s going on resonates with physically disabled people’s experience of being left out of physically inaccessible spaces and activities or blind people’s experience of not

³ The film begins with a captioned epigraph that reads “This film will be captioned for the signing impaired” and for the next hour in silence, hearing audience members have the tables turned on them, as they must decode a representation made for deaf people fluent in American Sign Language. In April 2006, I saw this film at the “Screening Disability: Chicago’s International Deaf and Disability Film Festival” with an audience that was roughly half deaf and half hearing people. Often the deaf audience members would laugh or respond to what was going on before the captioning could catch up to the ASL. The signing was going so fast that the captions seemed to fly by; after an hour, I was exhausted trying to keep up with the captions and understand what was going on. This technique forces hearing audiences to experience the effects of communication bias themselves, even if it’s just a taste.

having access to visual information. Galloway's hyperbolic portrayal of the paranoia that can be spawned by living in this state ends with the final insult: "For two years I lived like that. And nobody noticed." This line is painful and funny at more than one level. At the first level, the line is simply absurd, since her frenetic reenactment of her paranoid delusions would be impossible for anyone to ignore. At the second level, though, the line elicits from disabled people a laughter of recognition, recognition that our experiences of exclusion are often brushed off as "not mattering" or "not being important" when they are so blatant to us.

The final excerpt, this one illustrating her "schizophrenic" episode, takes place in a mental hospital where Galloway is performing "Sherrie Loose, with special guest Mr. Handchop," an "art therapy" entertainment for the rest of the patients. I have seen this particular scene performed live more than any other part of *Out All Night* because Galloway has performed this scene more than a dozen times as a guest artist in my Introduction to Theatre classes. I also saw her perform this scene for the Queer Disability Conference in San Francisco in 2002. This particular scene incites the strongest laughter, a guffawing laughter, whenever and wherever and for whomever I have seen it performed. But conversations about this scene are very different amongst various audiences in different contexts. My mostly non-disabled Intro to Theatre students seem to revel in the sheer messiness of the scene. I usually invite Galloway at the end of the semester, a semester in which I've repeated *ad nauseum* that food and drink are not allowed in classroom and have even made students leave the lecture hall to finish a fast food meal. In defiance of every university policy, Galloway sprays water, smashes potato chips, spits, hits the stage with a hammer, and smears make-up all over the place, and the students roar with laughter. They love her physicality, charisma, and the silliness of Mr. Handchop, even though most of them are too young to get the "Shari Lewis and Lamb Chop" reference. As budding theatre artists, they "get" that she survived the mental health system through the use of performance, that performance itself is a tool for survival.

At the Queer Disability Conference, the audience similarly guffawed, but after the immediate laughter, the "digested" reaction

was mixed among different disability constituencies. Some people with mental illness and other survivors of mental health systems felt that Galloway's wild-eyed portrayal of "madness" was offensive. I'm convinced that this reaction was largely because the excerpt was performed out of context from the rest of *Out All Night*. I'm sure, too, that this reaction was fueled by complaints leveled against the conference organizers that not enough attention was paid to making disability accommodations specific to the needs of people with mental illness, that the conference content was not inclusive of their issues, and that people with mobility impairments or other disabilities used insensitive, exclusionary language. Not knowing that Galloway herself was a survivor of mental illness, some from this constituency read her performance as another instance where someone from a different disability group, in this case deaf, was oppressing them. Other conference goers read the scene completely differently, especially those of us who have spent time in institutional settings, where non-disabled "do-gooder" therapists impose their patronizing assignments on their disabled charges. Many of us laughed cathartically as Galloway turned the performance "assignment" against the do-gooder, a case of the inmates taking over the asylum, and she positioned those of us in the audience as her fellow partners in crime. Most audience members reveled in her portrayal of being a do-gooder's nightmare, a very bad patient. This is a fantasy that many of us have had but have never performed.

Given my varied and numerous experiences with these bits and with Galloway herself, it's not surprising that I read the contents of *Just the Funny Bits* through this history. I not only appreciate Galloway's performances for what they are, but for what they are not. Her portrayals completely flout conventional representations of disability. They are fresh, off-kilter, hilarious, and critical; they are *not* stereotypically sentimental, tragic, or inspirational. Galloway has been a pioneer in the American disability art and culture scene, someone who is credited with breaking through barriers for other disabled theatre artists, including myself. Her innovations stem from her unique perspective of disability, that her experiences of disability provide her a vantage point that shows the rest of us how to look at her subjects anew with a fierce attitude.

In other words, she makes use of disability, she does not deny it, and she explores it in all its complexity beyond the care-or-cure paradigm we are used to from popular culture. Think of how in the opening monologue of this video, her disability experience broadens our concept of the gaze. In her self portrayal as an awkward adolescent, she is not only under constant visual surveillance because of her femaleness—her conspicuous breasts, her period, her hairy armpits and legs, and goofy glasses—but she is under aural surveillance as well because she draws unwanted attention to the sounds she inadvertently makes—her “lateral lisp” and beeping hearing aid. Sound becomes a form of the gaze, the stare. Also think of how Galloway’s full-body, almost pantomime-like performance style is a reflection of the lived experience of deafness. She doesn’t rely on speech alone to communicate her message. If you are lucky to see Galloway perform live, you will find this quality becoming apparent even more than it does on the video. In *Funny Bits*, Galloway is performing for the camera, not an audience. Live, Galloway feeds off her audience’s responses, whipping herself into a frenzy at times in response to audience reaction. She gets in audience members’ faces, even forces comprehension; she’s the antithesis to the Method actor.

As you watch these excerpts, revel with Galloway in her unique perspective. Whether disabled or non-disabled, we have all been taught that it’s not polite to stare at disabled people, that we should pretend that a person’s disability does not exist, and that disabled people succeed “despite” their disabilities not “because” of disability. I encourage you to accept Galloway’s invitation to throw off this social conditioning and really look because when we do pay attention to disability—its idiosyncrasies, its politics, its aesthetics—we gain a fuller understanding of the human experience in all its messy and hilarious variety.