

SLOW: Crip Theory, Dyslexia and the Borderlands of Disability and Ablebodiedness

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What is ablebodiedness? When do “invisible” disabilities become visible? How can performance complicate notions of ability and disability? Although theories of disability are starting to destabilize a false dichotomy between able bodied and disabled bodied, I find myself, as a person with dyslexia, in the borderlands of disability and ablebodiedness. For me this borderland is a place of contradiction and ambiguity, plagued with a cognitive impairment and blessed with kinesthetic intelligence. Questions of intersectional identities, identity politics, disability activism and disciplined scholarship are all complicated by the hybridity of the borderlands. The fluidity inherent in crip (theory) and its attention to the cultural production and the performativity of ablebodiedness, can provide a framework for analysis that embraces the isolating spaces of the borderlands. This project, which consists of the performance piece “SLOW” and written analysis, theorizes a crip performance methodology that moves beyond disability visibly marked on the body and argues performance is a “dyslexic” method of learning and knowing.

I wrote, choreographed and performed *The Turtle Walker: Staging Disability, Crip and Queer Theory* (March, 2008) as my MA culminating creative project in the Department of Women Studies at San Francisco State University. “SLOW” was one of eight live performances intermixed with video and sound clips. *The Turtle Walker* focused on the intersectionality between “invisible” disability (mainly dyslexia) and “invisible” queer identities and interrogated the ways in which social institutions produce and naturalize ablebodiedness and heterosexuality. My process of deconstructing identity formation involves analyzing interpellation and the systems of power that police the performance of identity. This research/performance project was

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(ed. note: this essay is accompanied by a video of a performance of “SLOW.” See <http://liminalities.net/6-2/slow.htm>.)

incited by my identity as a white, crip, queer, middle-class (mentality) woman and my desire to explore the intersectionalities of these complex identity markers. As a student with a dyslexic filter that interfered with the flow of information that was propelled by traditional teaching and learning, I used physical performance as a method of processing, communicating, critiquing and learning. Combining theater, dance, mime, television, youtube clips, visual images, and introduced by a scholarly narrative that situated the project at the intersection of several fields —theater and performance studies, queer theory and sexuality studies, women and gender studies, disability studies and crip theory—*The Turtle Walker* deconstructed traditional forms of knowledge-production and modeled alternative embodied ways of knowing.

One of the flaneurs of nineteenth century Paris was the turtle walker. This image of a person strolling down the arcades walking a turtle carries a variety of meanings. Petra Kuppens opens her text, *Disability and Contemporary Performance: Bodies on the Edge*, with a description of Baudelaire’s Paris, analyzed by Walter Benjamin, where the turtle walker is a symbol of resistance to modernity and the fast pace of changing life in Paris. The turtle’s slow pace subverts and disrupts the rhythm of normalcy. The image of the displaced turtle walker in the city streets challenges conventions providing a space for ambivalence and contradiction (Kuppens 1-2). I chose the turtle walker as a title of my culminating creative work because the project inserted difference into an unyielding system.

Disability performers and scholars are making some amazing strides in the field of (disability) performance, and living in the Bay Area I have the fortune of witnessing first hand many of our accomplishments. For example, the annual show *Sins Invalid* is an important project on disability and sexuality and has been a major source of inspiration for my personal work including performance practitioners Leroy Franklin Moore Jr., Nomy Lamm, Patty Berne and seeley quest. Axis Dance Company is creating staged performances featuring trained modern dancers intermixed on stage with dancers in wheelchairs. I would like to recognize and pay tribute to these performers and others in the field who are taking risks on stage and creating spaces for new meanings.

Disability performance and scholarship tends to represent disability visually marked on the body addressing issues of disability access, visual representation, rehabilitation/medicalization and more recently sexuality. Rosemary Garland-Thomson employs a feminist disability approach and analyses the representation of disability in cultural media —magazines, film, pornography, literature —with particular attention to disability visibly marked on the body (Garland-Thomson, “Redrawing,” “Re-Shaping,” “Integrating”). In their essay, “Res(Crip)ting Feminist Theatre Through Disability Theatre: Selections from The DisAbility Project,” Ann Fox and Joan Lipkin articulate a disability performance methodology that is based on a disability aesthetics dependent on bodies that are physically and visually marked by impairment. *The Turtle Walker* moved away from “visible” impairments as a foundation for theorizing disability aesthetics in performance; I used my unmarked body to make “invisible” disabilities visible. In this case, there are two meanings to

the term “visible:” one is the literal sense of seeing with the eyes—making visible the everyday performances of dyslexia—and the other is visible in a broader sense referring to the inclusion of dyslexia in scholarship, performance and activism. Drawing on the accomplishments of the field, this project theorizes a crip performance methodology that addresses the borderlands of disability and ablebodiedness, including impairments not visibly marked on the body.

Crip theory provides hope for “invisible” disabilities like dyslexia. Both Carrie Sandahl “Queering the Crip or Crippling The Queer? Intersections of Queer and Crip Identities in Solo Autobiographical Performance” (27) and Robert McRuer *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (34) suggest that the term “crip” includes those with physical impairments and mental and sensory impairment as well. McRuer states that “crip theory would resist delimiting the kinds of bodies and abilities that are acceptable or that will bring about change. Ideally, crip theory might function — like the term ‘queer’ itself — ‘oppositionally and relationally but not necessarily substantively, not as a positivity but as a positionality, not as a thing, but as a resistance to the norm” (Halperin quoted in McRuer 31). “Queer” and “crip” are both critical terms that work to denaturalize normativity by deconstructing heterosexuality and ablebodiedness respectively. Drawing on Judith Butler’s theories of performativity (from *Gender Trouble* and “Insubordination”), McRuer argues that through repetition, ablebodiedness sets itself up as the ultimate achievement for disability, the goal to strive for. Ablebodiedness repetitively establishes itself as the origin and the ground of all imitation (McRuer 9). Due to the “invisibility” of dyslexia, I argue that a focus on the ideological production of ablebodiedness is particularly useful when exploring the borderlands as opposed to a focus on the representation of physical disability in cultural texts. I am hoping that crip may emerge as a more fluid term critiquing and claiming the contradiction and ambiguity of the borderlands.

A Crip Performance Methodology

My crip performance methodology was the theoretical framework that united my artistic choices and worked to visually and conceptually communicate my argument. My goal was to interrogate and challenge the ideological production of ablebodiedness and heterosexuality and provide a space for new meanings. Petra Kuppers’ *Disability and Contemporary Performance: Bodies on the Edge* and José Esteban Muñoz’s *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* are the two major sources that informed the framework for my artistic choices. Kuppers’ project locates moments in disability performances that create uncertainties that disrupt conventional meanings calling for a critical reflection. Similarly, Muñoz identifies moments of disidentification where performers (queers of color) use a campy queer method and play off dominant culture, tweaking representations providing a space for new meanings.

Kuppers’ theoretical discussion of the performativity of disability and her exploration of the various methods used by disability performers to disrupt, challenge

and revision the meaning and social knowledges of disability informed my crip performance methodology. Koppers focuses her analysis on uncertainties, what I am referring to as ambivalences and contradictions, in the staged and choreographed interventions/invitations performances that work to destabilize and denaturalize categories (specifically impairments visibly marked on the body) making room for audiences to create new meanings. Koppers draws on Elizabeth Grosz and Judith Butler's (from *Bodies That Matter*) theories of performativity, arguing that bodies are available to us through materiality, which only has meaning because it is discursive (Koppers 5). For example, when a child is born, it is common for the doctor to announce, "it's a boy," and this discursive practice gives meaning to the body. Koppers argues discursive practices actively produce the disabled body and the body becomes visible through an arrangement of meanings and social knowledges (6). I argue that interrogating and disrupting the discursive practices that produce the dyslexic/disabled body and the able body is particularly important and useful due to the "invisibility" of dyslexia.

A major theme in Koppers' text is the use of technology in disability performance as a method of disrupting the audiences' visual perceptions of ability and disability. Koppers describes different disability performances and analyzes the ways in which these performances use specific theatrical devices—non-narrative storylines, voice-over, slow motion, etc.—that work to create a specific "disability" style of communicating in performance that allows the audience with a different way of seeing (95-7). For example, the British dance company, *Outside In*, utilizes a filmdance method, physically challenging dance that is dependent on or interwoven with the film projection on stage. The film techniques include montage and image manipulation, where landscape paintings become a row of heads and wheelchairs roll through walls (Koppers 68). The filmdance technique takes advantage of systems of recognition and representation to destabilize the perceptions of a fixed disabled body. I find the use of technology on stage particularly useful in making visible "invisible" disabilities and see this hybrid form of live performance and media as crip.

My notion of a crip performance methodology is also informed by Muñoz's theories of disidentifications. In his text, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, Muñoz focuses on the intersectionality of minoritized race and sexuality and does not interrogate disability, but his intersectional approach lends itself nicely to disability and queer sexuality. Muñoz's notion of "rehabilitating" cultural representations (3) and "accessing" new realities (133) reverberate through disability studies. Informed by Muñoz, my queer performance methodology is a campy, over the top, parody style of performance that deconstructs, alters and recycles cultural representations to subvert or resist heterosexuality and ablebodiedness. While "SLOW" does not capture the campy queer parody like that of other performance pieces in *The Turtle Walker*, "SLOW" does utilize Muñoz's disidentifications as a performance technique; the performer reproduces or performs on stage recognizable cultural material but tweaks or alters it in such a way that the audience, seeing it in a new frame, is required to critique the recognizable cultural

material and make new meanings from the experience.

A SLOW Analysis

With its simple design, “SLOW” carries layered and complex meanings and typifies my crip performance methodology. I will analyze my artistic choices in “SLOW” to demonstrate 1) the institutional production of intellectual ablebodiedness, 2) the discursive production of the disabled body 3) the materiality of disability through discourse and interpellation, 4) the rehabilitation of the disabled body and performativity of ablebodiedness including the transformative spaces and 5) the deconstruction of dominant notions of “ablebodied” destabilizing the cultural value of slow. In line with Koppers’ analysis of technology as an intricate part of disability performance, “SLOW” illustrates the ways in which technology intermixed with live performance can challenge the physicality and visibility of ablebodiedness embracing visual and conceptual contradiction and ambiguity.

The phrases that flash on the screen represent a discursive voice of academia (K – higher education) and produce a notion of ablebodied intelligence based on the ability to quickly think, process and verbally respond. The educational institution is dependent on standardized testing (the SAT, GRE, LMAT, GSAT, etc) and the multiple choice, true/false, matching style of assessment is alive and well in academia. “SLOW” references the common phrases used when administering standardized testing, for example, “you have 45 minutes to complete this section,” “this test will be timed,” “you have five minutes remaining.” This manner of assessment and the accompanying discourse, utilized at every level of education, marginalizes kinesthetic ways of processing, understanding and regurgitating information and negates the processing speeds of people with learning disabilities.

These anxiety producing phrases of standardized testing are intermixed with a few commonly used phrases from game shows. Phrases like “is that your final answer,” “are you smarter than a fifth grader?” “would you like to buy a vowel?” are recognizable game show phrases. Originally, the intermixing of phrases from educational institutions and mass media was designed to illustrate that these two institutions work collectively to produce dominant notions of intelligence based on a quick processing speed. Although, based on audience feedback, I am not sure this was a successful artistic choice for the audience did not pick up on the connection. Instead, these phrases were often read as part of the campy queer elements present in other performance pieces in *The Turtle Walker*.

Although there are many ways in which a dyslexic person encounters and responds to the written word, “SLOW” makes the dyslexic student’s relationship to words “visible” to the audience through a form of internalization or cognitive embodiment. The written form of the words requires the audience to read the phrases, injecting the phrases into the minds of the audience; the audience is required to share in the internalization of these messages. After four minutes of reading negative phrases, the audience experiences an example, or reframing, of a dyslexic

student's internal monologue and external messaging. As the performance progresses, the pace of the phrases that flash on the screen increases as a means of producing a "dyslexic" anxiety in the audience. Spectators reported feeling fearful that they have missed something important because they cannot read all the phrases. They are also asked to simultaneously watch physical movement, while attempting to read words, which caused the audience to make a choice as to where they wanted to focus their attention. The everyday performance of "invisible" disability becomes visible or realized in a visceral way by the audience.

The institution's discursive practices represented on the screen and the physical movement on stage work together to illustrate the performativity of disability. "SLOW" aims to blur the lines between the messages from educators and the messages dyslexic students adopt as negative self-talk, institutional surveillance and self-surveillance. Phrases like, "you are special," "you are different," "you are perfect" and "do you have a minute?" as well as single words like, "focus" and "concentrate," were strategically designed to create ambivalence around who is speaking the phrases: the student, the teacher, or both? Drawing on Koppers' discussion of performativity and Foucault's notion of "biopower" (Koppers 5-6), the academy as an institution disciplines the data of "normal intelligence" or surveillance, and the dyslexic student's adoption of the phrases as their own driven by a desire to be "normal," or self-surveillance. The phrases repeat throughout the piece to represent the dyslexic students' production of their own meanings around their disability through institutional discourse. The (dyslexic) disabled body is produced discursively by the repetitive phrases on the screen and through the materiality of the slow moving body on stage, the performativity of disability.

The physical labeling and interpellation of (dyslexia) disability, or the connection between the body and the words, is key to this analysis of the performativity of disability. The movement in the piece is designed to incorporate levels to represent the "ups and downs" of being labeled "slow;" I start standing, go down to the floor, roll over, stand up, slide back down to the floor, roll over again only make it half way up and end sitting with my back to the audience. For me, there are two places where the words are connected to the movement, places where I have internalized the words on the screen. When the word "SLOW" appears on the screen, I am standing under the label, which is the only time I look directly at the audience. My head rolls down and my body bends over one vertebra at a time indicating I have been interpellated as slow and have internalized the label "slow." The second place is when the word "BAD" appears on the screen and my head and back lean over my knees and body releases energy; I exhale embodying the internalization of "BAD." These are key moments where discourse and materiality interact indicating the performativity of disability.

The quick phrases also represent the performativity of ablebodiedness and the rehabilitation of the (dyslexic) disabled body. "You should be able to put the definition in your own words," "you should contribute to the conversation," "take a few minutes to read this essay" "think it through quickly," and "this is not your best

work” are all phrases I heard from teachers in graduate school, and these phrases are mixed in with phrases I repeatedly heard in primary education “you are not trying,” “you are lazy,” “just try harder,” “what were you thinking,” etc. The repetition of the phrases indicates the repetition of ablebodiedness and its assertion as the ultimate goal to strive for, the ultimate achievement (McRuer drawing on Butler’s *Gender Trouble*). All of the phrases strung together paint the picture of the ablebodied intelligent student (with the ability to quickly retrieve or access information) and work to rehabilitate the slow motion.

According to Butler, there are important spaces between the repetition that allow for change because a repetition cannot create an exact replica of itself (“Imitation” 304). The large words that are inserted between, or are a part of, these repeating phrases “WHY” “IS” “SLOW” “BAD” “?” represent the spaces in the repetition that allow for reiteration, transgression, transformation or the possibility of creating new meanings. The phrase as a whole “why is slow bad?” disrupts and challenges, both visually and ideologically, the repetitive production of ablebodiedness. The contradiction between what the phrase is asking “why is slow bad?” and what the rest of the words are suggesting “time is of the essence” is an important site of resistance to the rehabilitation of the (dyslexic) disabled body.

In addition, the slow motion movement works to destabilize the visibility and physicality of dominant notions of ablebodiedness. Another visual contradiction lies in the quick phrases flashing on the screen and the slow motion movement; the phrases flash at a more rapid speed as the piece progresses but the movement remains constant. The constant slow motion movement is representative of a slow cognitive processing speed, which will always be different from what has been socially constructed as a normal and “intelligent” processing speed. The slow motion movement is physically challenging subverting the common perception of ablebodiedness and the disabled body that is visibly marked by impairment. The challenging movement suggests the words on the screen are the site of impairment, the cognitive disability. The quick phrases that flash on the screen are tweaked, altered or reframed by the slow motion movement; the juxtaposition works to give new meaning to the cultural value of quick and, more importantly, slow.

The Borderlands: Toward A Crip Politic

Why are contradictions and ambiguity useful central images in representing the borderlands in staged performance? Dyslexia is not visibly marked on the body yet there are important moments where the disability becomes visible as illustrated by the phrases in “SLOW.” Sometimes these moments are interpreted as ambiguous and are treated as “a common mistake” or “something that happens to everyone;” the everyday performances of dyslexia are often minimized, misunderstood or simply unrecognized. Also, my physical ability contradicts my cognitive ability. There are many ways that I perform ablebodiedness according to the *dominant perception* of ablebodiedness; I am physically able to walk, carry out physical tasks and access public

spaces. On the other hand, I share in the medicalization of disability —the doctor visits, special rehabilitative classes, documentation/proof of diagnosis, endless frustration and struggle over accommodations. I share in the socialization of disability — the alienation, public ridicule, (mis)judgment— therefore, I also share in disability activism, advocacy and rights movement.

Politically uniting under the umbrella term “disability” has been a site of contention in the borderlands partially due to a disciplinary divide. Disability studies and activism tends to focus on the cultural production of disability visually marked on the body analyzing the representation of disability in cultural text. There is a discipline divide between disability studies and learning disability research, and I will use my experience in the San Francisco State library as an example. When I first started this research project, I spent hours in the disability studies section frantically looking through all the tables of content, glossaries and indexes for anything on learning disabilities. These books did not include any discussion of dyslexia or other learning disabilities. All the research on learning disabilities is located across the library in its own section near education. It is only in recent years that individuals with a specific impairment have begun to identify with individuals with a different impairment. Again, I hope the term “crip” will emerge as a critical term that can, in a sense, unite disability “identities” through a focus on denaturalizing ablebodiedness and disrupting normalizing forces and discursive practices.

The voices (and bodies) from the borderlands have the potential to disrupt the traditional systems of academia. This project, the performance of “SLOW” and the written analysis, describes embodied ways of learning and knowing enmeshed with disability, which is a site of resistance in academia. Similar to the ways in which Gloria Anzaldúa in her text, *The Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* worked to disrupt the disciplining of knowledge in academia with her poetic writing as theory as well as her intermixing of Spanish. Her text specifically addresses immigration, Chicana identity, queer sexuality and spiritual activism, but her notions of a Borderland space/mentality can inform discussions of hybrid identity and disrupt dominant systems of thought in the academy. *The Turtle Walker* was a product of the Department of Women Studies and performance as a way of knowing was a *different* means of knowledge production within this particular department. Historically, Women Studies has struggled to be perceived as a “legitimate” field of study within the university, and therefore, in an effort to assert itself as legitimate (and conform), the *discipline* may have lost sight of its original project of making the institution more inclusive to marginalized identities. For example, the normative culminating project is the thesis, and many faculty members in the department refused to, or were unable to, acknowledge *The Turtle Walker* as a culminating creative project but instead continuously, almost impulsively, referring to it as a “thesis.” This discursive practice works to legitimize and privilege one form of knowledge production. “SLOW” is definitely an academic performance project bound by interdisciplinary scholarship it embodies theories of performance, gender, disability and sexuality. It works to disrupt and remind Women Studies to embrace diverse sites of knowledge production as a

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form of resistance to the norm and as a means of making the university more inclusive to learning disabilities.

I am particularly invested in making the connection between performance as embodied knowledge production and dyslexia. The accommodations for dyslexia that I find most useful are screen readers and auditory texts; I have a better chance of comprehending what I read when I hear the words as I see the words. The most useful “accommodation” I received at San Francisco State was the opportunity (resources and faculty support) to create a staged performance as my culminating project. Performance is a symbolic, nonlinear form of communication that allows for a more layered means of delivering and processing information by combining auditory voice overs, visual projection on the screen, vocal articulations of story and, most importantly, physical bodies moving on stage. Performance engages all the senses and allows for non-linear expression; it is no wonder I use performance as a way of learning.

Research projects are inherently limited in scope, and the borderlands call for an analysis of the ways in which this space is raced and classed. For example, class privilege allows for early diagnosis of dyslexia, remedial classes in elementary school and doctor visits, and at the same time, these medical, rehabilitative discursive practices produce the (dyslexic) disabled body. “SLOW” also functions within and is a product of white culture reproducing the common perception of the disabled body as white. This project only scratches the surface of the hybrid space of the borderlands; more work needs to be done in regards to race, class and privilege, not only in this project but also in the field of disability studies.

In conclusion, “SLOW” theorizes a crip performance methodology that moves beyond disability visibly marked on the body and argues that performance is a “dyslexic” way of learning and knowing. “SLOW” builds on and exemplifies the contradiction and ambiguity of the borderlands providing a space for transformation and new meaning. By reframing and making visible the invisible or unrecognized everyday performances of dyslexia and the institutional production of ablebodiedness, this project reveals the isolation of the borderlands as well as its potential to critique normativity, a crip politic. Frank Moore, born with cerebral palsy sees his body as the perfect body for a performance artists, “I am also fortunate because my body gives me a tool that other artists spend years to create...I want to encourage artists, who have not been so blessed with bodies that mark them as misfits, to aspire to be misfits anyway, to do misfit art. Their road is definitely harder than my road, but that’s life” (42). Moore’s words reverberate through my scholarship, activism and performance as I aspire to disrupt and resist the production of ablebodiedness and disability from the borderlands.

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