

Performing Post-Accident Professional Identity in Personal Narrative: Grappling with Embodied Vulnerability

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This analysis traces the emergence of post-accident professional identity through open-ended personal narrative performances with a focus on one narrator who 'passes' as her pre-accident self in initial encounters. Together the narrators illuminate the daily performance of post-accident professionalism as a struggle over a shared fear of embodied mortality. This fear is intensified within a cultural space rooted in discourses of enlightenment humanism that seek to exalt the mind through controlling the body. Through exposing these fears we can begin to create a professional space that embraces bodies that remind us of the inescapable vulnerability of the flesh through which our identities emerge in daily performance.

This essay explores the personal performance of a post-accident professional identity as a cultural struggle over a shared fear of human vulnerability. Personal narrative performances crystallize how post-accident bodies unsettle us, serving as fleshed reminders that humans can move from the cultural category of 'able' to 'disabled' in one performance act. Unlike disabilities brought on by disease, the post-accident body serves as a continual reminder that *any body* and *every body* is vulnerable to have their performance of self dramatically disrupted. The cultural anxiety surrounding post-accident bodies is potentially intensified in the context of professionalism, which stems from discourses of enlightenment humanism that exalts the mind's ability to reason over the body's visceral experience, rendering it insignificant (Allan, 119). Personal narrative performances of post-accident professional identity call attention to re-surfacing processes of performativity surrounding a deeply embedded cultural fear and offer hope of how we can make professional space for the inevitable changing of all human bodies in future performances.

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Mapping Cultural Discomfort with Mortal Embodiment: The Post-Accident Body's Performance of Professionalism

The narratives included in this essay emerged from a two year, 26-participant study of self-defined physically disabled professionals from across the United States.¹ This essay focuses on narrations of post-accident identity where storytellers share how the abrupt altering of their bodies forever changed their daily performances of self. Judith Butler asserts, “One is not simply a body, but in some very key sense one *does* one’s body” (521, emphasis mine). The ‘doing’ of their changed bodies, marked as ‘physically disabled’ in their professional interactions materializes the cultural struggle over the inescapable vulnerability of being human in time and space. Unlike other cultural categories of difference, disability is “defined not as a set of observable, predictable traits – like racialized or gendered features – but rather as *any* departure from an unstated and functional norm” (Garland-Thomson, 24). Consequently, narrators focused on contrasting embodiments, performing who they *are* through citing who they *were* as their identities surface in ongoing struggles with and against their former, pre-accident performances of self. Their narratives reveal their identities as fragile as the mortal flesh and bones that facilitate them.

Like all performances, each narrative emerged thickly interwoven in cultural discourses and surfacing processes of performativity. Mary Strine explains, “[p]erformativity must be understood not as a deliberate ‘act’ but rather as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names” (314). These post-accident narrative performances emerge from discourses that mark them as the “embodiment of corporeal insufficiency and deviance” within the professional space that is rooted in enlightenment humanism and which privileges “autonomy, reason, and progress as the means of achieving human rights and freedom” (Garland-Thomson, 6; Allan, 119). Familiar past performances of post-accident identity and professionalism enable the narrators through conventions others have used and re-used. Within the storytelling event, both narrator and audience draw upon these understandings, citing and re-citing them, even in their efforts to dismantle the very meanings they reiterate.

The Passing Post-Accident Body Blurring Boundaries in the Workplace

In order to grapple with the complexity of the performance of the post-accident body in a professional space, I will focus mainly on the narrative of one participant whose body exists in the liminal space between pre and post accident, crystallizing the tension between the performances of professionalism a post-accident body potentially

¹ All the narrators responded to a call for participants distributed across professional list serves. Each participant contacted me and face-to-face interviews were scheduled either in-person or via webcam depending on the participants’ preferences. Narrators that responded lacked diversity in race, sexual orientation, and economic status so that this discussion emerges largely from a white, heteronormative, middle class perspective.

navigates. Her story serves as contrast to the other narrators that do not disrupt the expectations of the professional institutions that employ them. After a back injury, **Wendie**² chooses to go back to school to become an environmental studies professor. Unlike the other narrators, Wendie's body passes upon first encounter as her pre-accident self –muscular and athletic – despite the fact that she cannot sit, walk uphill, or carry anything without her body convulsing in spasms. Thus, Wendie's professional performance emerges in contention. Throughout her narrative she performs her struggle to resist being deemed an 'accidental hire' that can only be corrected through formal dismissal despite her professional accomplishments. Her identity surfaces as caught between her pre- and post-accident performance of self. Across the five narrative vignettes of her story – (1) enrolling in graduate school (2) finding an adviser (3) beginning a tenure-track position (4) not getting tenure (5) and suing her former department for restitution – Wendie's embodiment arguably reminds others of the professional identity they had hoped to co-create with her through daily interaction but cannot through her post-accident body. In response, her present performance of self is deemed lacking and deceitful, allowing those around her to justify their desire to avoid a body that reminds them of the blurred boundaries between able and disabled.

Wendie embodies the 'accidental' post-accident hire in her attempt to struggle against (rather than reiterate the expectations of) those around her following her injury. Her performance of post-accident identity disrupts cultural expectations: that a stigmatized, post-accident body should enter the professional space by invitation only (like other narrators will exemplify) and perform a post-accident professional role that reiterates, rather than challenges, dominant discourses of professionalism. Kristin Langellier describes the performance of personal narrative as "a story of the body told through the body, which makes cultural conflict concrete" (151). Stories of post-accident identity materialize the conflict over bodies that remind us of our fleshed vulnerability in a cultural space that seeks to minimize the role of body and offers opportunities to embrace rather than the inevitability of embodied change.

Creating Narrative Identity on the Page: Transcription as Interpretation and Performance

All the narrative performances emerged from the face-to-face encounters through which they were created. Each participant responded to the single question: "What does it mean to you to be a physically disabled professional? Please begin wherever you would like to begin and end wherever you would like to end." Like all human interactions, each unique narrative event cannot be captured as it materialized within the time and space of the performance, only cited and re-produced, with the potential for new meanings and understandings to emerge. I attempt to re-create our performance encounter through my transcription choices. I model my transcriptions

² All names have been changed to protect the identity of the participants.

after Eric Peterson and Kristin Langellier's process of narrative transcription for performance of identity analysis. Through enacting this process, I create a written performance with which readers can interact and remain conscious of the voices of the bodies through which these narratives materialized in past performances. The first step consists of a rough transcription of each narrative in its entirety. I then listen again and enter in subject headings, outlining the elements in the story to give a basic structural framework of the participants' narratives. I then divide each narrative into vignettes, (e.g. mini-narratives centered on a particular theme within the larger narrative). Following this process, I repeatedly listen to the portions of the interviews I choose to closely analyze, recognizing every laugh, sigh, emphasis, and change in pitch or tone. I eliminate commas and periods and move to a new line to indicate the natural pauses that constitute a person's unique speech pattern, so that the narrative structure resembles poetry.

All of the narrative vignettes that form the basis of this analysis are transcriptions of audio recordings and embodied communication except for the final interaction between Wendie and me. This text is based on an impromptu conversation Wendie and I had during a chance encounter at a restaurant in a town where both of us were vacationing with our families three years after the initial interview.³

Performing Post-Accident Professional Identity: Embodied Reminder of Human Vulnerability

Prologue to a Passing Post-Accident Performance: A Picture of Athleticism – a Performance of Disability

I met Wendie two weeks after she found out that she did not receive tenure. As I arrived at her spacious 19th century home located on a secluded backstreet of a quaint New England town, Wendie greeted me at the door. She was dressed in nylon cargo shorts, a fitted navy blue crew cut t-shirt, and Teva athletic sandals. With her cropped curls, tanned skin, and lean, muscular build she reminded me of a park ranger. I soon found out that she had been a field scientist for a state department, working alongside park rangers, before she went back to school to become a professor after a back injury. My initial impressions served as a foreshadowing of the story that was to come, a story of a struggle over a body blurring the boundaries between pre and post accident identity, with enduring consequences.

Wendie and I sat facing each other on her couch for three hours. Her narrative came quickly, moving seamlessly from one scene to the next. As I transcribed her story I realized I had not spoken during the interview aside from some initial conversation before her story and some conversation after she finished. Wendie laced together the series of events that led to her

³ I asked Wendie if I could create a script derived from this follow-up conversation in a new article for this "performing accident" issue, and she agreed to its inclusion as the epilogue. This final performance text is our agreed re-enactment of this conversation based on our shared memories of the performance event. In turn, Wendie's story spans from her decision to enter graduate school to this past summer, three years after our initial conversation.

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current professional performance: an accomplished teacher and researcher who, despite surpassing all seemingly objective measures, was denied tenure. I left her home feeling a bit light headed and chilled after taking on the role of her present audience. Perhaps I more readily empathized with her feelings of helplessness in the face of injustice because of my situated embodiment: a doctoral student with spastic cerebral palsy who would soon be on the academic job market. Wendie followed me out the door and down the stairs and stood in front of her house as I drove away. We exchanged a few emails during my analysis process as I sent her different excerpts from her narrative that I used in my dissertation chapters. I did not see her again until last summer, in a small pub in a tourist town where I was having dinner with my partner and our son.

Locating Identity: Finding a Professional Performance Context Post-Accident

Wendie was the only post-accident narrator who, through her passing body, gained employment without disclosing her post-accident ability. Other narrators described how their deemed ‘deviant’ bodies entered professional spaces with minimal disruption, through initiatives to increase workplace diversity or because the job required a ‘disabled perspective,’ (e.g. a disability studies professor or advocate for disabled employees). In these designated roles, post-accident bodies that evoke attention can be present without being disruptive to dominant discourses of professionalism that seek to render the body irrelevant. Roles created to manage the presence of atypical bodies without challenging dominant performances allow post-accident professionals to remain culturally stigmatized even in their personal experiences of institutional acceptance. Their successful performances emerge constrained and peripheral, deemed tolerable only through their ability to reify rather than disrupt dominant performances of professionalism that allow the body to be essentially ignored. **Ernest**, who became paralyzed from the chest down after a diving accident, exemplifies this recurrent theme in a narrative surrounding his interview for the disability access coordinator at a university:

Well my boss was Professor Cobbs
and Professor Cobbs ended up being a father figure to me (soft laugh)
I’ll never forget in his ah
when they when I was being interviewed he said
“okay *suppose* I ah I put a lot of budget into making accommodations here in
my”
he was in charge of the student union
“and you come to me
and you come to me
and say (cough) ‘*I want something else*”
he says
“ what would your attitude be at that time?”
And I know he was feeling me out to see if I’d be real

If I'd be *rational* (soft laugh)
and I said
"You could come to me and say
Look
I've already spent 2 percent of my budget on disability and ah
we're going to have to take this in in slower steps"
and I just saw him unfold his arms at that point
and *we're the best of buddies* (soft laugh)
and I had to really be kind and gentle and easy with them
proving myself to be one of their
to be one of the gang
and not to be you know holding a *disability fist* underneath their chin
all the time
ah got to prove myself to be one of the players
and at that point
I would see one attitude after another to fall until we got to be all team
players together
I had a very good system of advocates
that is directors in other parts of the university with whom I had to deal and
ah
I got an *incredible amount* of stuff done in ten years

Ernest delivered his story slowly and with a lot of emphasis, as though he was sharing the satisfying secret of his post-accident professional success. The ending is happy; the gatekeeper not only allows him into the organization but becomes a "father figure," lovingly guiding him through his career. From his first 'correct answer' during his interview, Ernest skillfully navigates his role as an 'abnormal' body hired to evoke attention and alter the professional environment to fit other 'abnormal' hires. His careful acquiescence to deeply entrenched beliefs surrounding disruptive bodies in professional spaces allows him to perform his role of an intentional post-accident hire successfully. He reiterates familiar meanings and understandings of institutional priorities rather than attempting to force dismantlement of marginalizing terrain of the organization with a "*disability fist*." Their acquiescence to his requests (rather than demands) materializes once he affirms that the marginalized role of bodies like his own cannot disrupt the perceived vital aspects of professional performance. Ernest positions his performance as accessibility coordinator as fruitful, "I got an *incredible amount* of stuff done in ten years." However, his daily "rational" co-performance of professionalism with his new colleagues that allows him to be interpreted as a "team player" involves co-reiterating dominant understandings of professionalism that marginalize bodies that demand attention.

Ernest moves through space strapped into a wheelchair with a ventilator which allows professional gatekeepers to take precautions before inviting his potentially 'disruptive' post-accident body into their cultural space. In contrast, Wendie's body

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“passes” as nondisruptive (constitutively “normal”). As long as she is able to limit the amount of time she is seated to under five minutes, others cannot discern her injury. Furthermore, her inability to sit compels her to walk rather than drive to most locations, so she is thin, toned, and tan, characteristics associated with athleticism rather than disability. Because of this, unlike Ernest, her potential overseers (the graduate faculty of her potential doctoral program) do not seek an opportunity to evaluate her potential disruption to the status quo, readily accepting her pre-accident achievements (extensive fieldwork experience and grant writing) as proof of her ability to perform to their expectations of a doctoral student in environmental science. Wendie strategically chooses her professional space based on her perceptions of academia being accommodating to her physical ability rather than gatekeepers choosing to benevolently allow her access on their terms.

Based on her impressions of professors from when she was a student, Wendie rationalizes that her extensive knowledge and experience will compel others to adjust to the needs of her atypical body. However, as a new graduate student, her inability to perform the role of a field researcher independently leaves her new colleagues skeptical and reluctant to engage with her:

I was treated most poorly by the students who were in their 20s
who were outdoorsy and *loved* the environment
and had gone on outward bound and whatever
and would say in the most naïve way
“*well* how could *you* be a scientist
a field scientist or an environmental scientist
if you *can't sit*
if you *can't hike?*”
(switching to narrator’s voice)
you *know*
I’d-*already biked actually*
I would get other people
I would go with very strong people
they would carry my backpack
because I was figuring out how to go *up*
turns out that if somebody gave me a toe line —
Just the fact that someone was giving me a toe line sort of up
in other words if I had like a leash from somebody else
I could go up a steep trail and
it it
whatever muscles or nerves that it took to lift my own leg to *go up*
as long as I had some momentum
it didn’t cause that *whole spasm* reaction
so if I cause the spasm reaction then I can’t walk anymore then I
you know

on the trail until I stop spasming and there's no ice packs on the trail
and you can do a quick cold pack but then you've used it (sigh)
but I had already by that time figured out how to hike
though not carry my own stuff
or find hiking trails that had low grade because *I love to be outside*
and I had plenty
and at the time I was able bodied
I had plenty of you know
tough outdoorsy friends um
and I *thought* that I would meet more when I moved but
in fact by leaving my outdoorsy friends
who knew me as an outdoorsy able-bodied person (sigh)
I took on a whole new identity that didn't
it wasn't my
it wasn't the identity I felt

Wendie positions herself as an informed narrator, introducing her younger colleagues as a collective character naïve of their hurtful bias and unable to realize their misinterpretations of her. She notes that she had difficulty adjusting to what she saw as “a whole new identity that . . . wasn't the identity [she] felt.” Wendie still identifies with the performance her passing body evokes, that of a capable environmental scientist, an identity that she continued to co-perform with those who knew her pre-accident. However, this revised co-performance ceases in her new space. While Wendie's fellow graduate students are familiar to her – reminiscent of the friends she had pre-accident – their response to her is unfamiliar and frustrating. Lacking any prior co-performances of “outdoorsy able-bodied” people, they are not compelled to participate in any adaptive techniques to allow Wendie to co-identify with them. Unlike Ernest who initially evoked feelings of suspicion but became part of the team, Wendie who readily gained admittance is later restricted to the periphery, deemed an incapable imposter without a convincing answer to the question, “*How could you be a scientist?*”

Re-Performing Identity: Co-constituting Post-Accident Professionalism through Shared Memories

Wendie's struggle with her new colleagues illuminates how, as Judith Butler notes, our identities are only real to the extent that we re-perform them. Without re-performances allowing the performativity surrounding Wendie's identity as an “outdoorsy able-bodied person” to re-surface, interpretations of her shift as new meanings are assigned to her body and in turn her identity. Performativity calls our attention to the “intelligibility of bodies – the codes and conventions that make some bodies worthy and legitimate” (Bell and Blaeuer, 17). Through the materializing of performativity we continually *become who we are* through our re-performances of self,

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our personal truths and identities only real to the extent we are able to perpetuate them through our ongoing interactions with others. Without her friends from her prior context to aid her, Wendie cannot reiterate her prior performance. Instead, she is forced to perform a new identity, a deemed ‘nonathletic, disabled’ graduate student seeking a degree others assume requires a physical performance of which her body is deemed incapable. Accepted into the program based on her prior accomplishments she cannot re-perform without assistance, Wendie is perceived as a fraud and left on the periphery of a group she assumed acceptance within.

Wendie’s experience gives credence to the fears of another storyteller who made different decisions, illuminating the re-surfacing of performativity across cultural interactions. **Ulmer**, like Wendie, had his identity altered by a sudden accident after he was already established in his chosen career. While ice climbing with friends he fell, paralyzing his legs and chest. He now uses a wheelchair. Unlike Wendie, Ulmer continued to work as an architect in the same small town he had worked in for ten years prior to his accident. He remains successful, yet positions his success as contingent on his ability to re-perform his professional identity with those who knew him as an able-bodied architect, and who desire to continue to participate in their familiar relationship after his accident.

Well everybody was surprised and shocked that I had the accident
but um
was I working for someone
I worked for clients that I also worked for before my accident
and after my accident
you build your clients obviously
I hadn’t had any trouble since my accident getting work
Um because a lot of my work is repeat clients
who I worked with in the past and work with again
And that’s been good
My old partner actually left
Moved further south because there’s more opportunities
But I ah
I didn’t go with him
It’s too risky when people don’t know ya
Aren’t sure you can do the job (sigh)
I *couldn’t* risk it

Both Ulmer and Wendie are able to continue to perform their prior identities through others’ willingness to co-perform with them, creating adaptive performances to allow a continuing revision of their identity. Ulmer fears this willing co-performance would not continue if those around him did not participate in his successful pre-accident professional performance, granting him legitimacy. Wendie performs the narrative that Ulmer suspects and actively avoids: those around her are not willing to validate

her professional identity post-accident, deeming her successful performance impossible and her identity fraudulent. Despite the knowledge and accomplishments that granted her admittance into a top doctoral program in environmental science, without others' willingness to engage with her in her new performance, she is marginalized within her new professional culture, a risk Ulmer is not willing to take.

Reiterating Identity: Restricting Future Performances with the Post-Accident Body

Wendie continually had difficulty fostering shared doctoral student identity in her new graduate program. In addition, Wendie's initial adviser withdrew financial support once he realized her level of ability during a graduate seminar that met at his house:

I couldn't get there by public transportation
I had to drive
so I'm driving which causes me *incredible* pain
and causes me to spasm
so after driving to his house there's *no way*
it's not that far a drive
but there's *no way* I'm going to be able to sit to stand
so I spent the semester laying on his floor once a week and that
THAT was the nail for me
even though I worked *hard*
all the grad students said
I worked harder than ANYONE
you know like it was incredible right um
well *first* of all I didn't spend all that time exercising
I walked a lot
but I basically threw *myself into graduate school*
but what he said was
"people *get hurt* working with me
I don't take you you're already hurt"
and I was like
and I didn't have the savvy to say that in itself is discrimination
"that's NOT how you decide who you take as a grad student
right um we could figure that out
if you would give me the *opportunity*"
so um
to this day that is a very
that's *a very*
a very disappointing interaction (sigh)

Wendie performs her adviser high pitched and slow, reminiscent of her graduate student colleagues. Wendie's performance of herself is also high pitched, but hurried. She re-performs her anxiety as though it took place only moments ago. She shifts to a lower, slower tone to debrief the interaction. Now, as a more mature narrator she lets me, her present audience, know that he was discriminating against her, that years later, she has the "savvy" to respond in ways she could not at the time of the interaction. She ends by positioning the event as still significant to her and unresolved years later.

All meanings are vulnerable to change, to alter through the same daily performances through which they emerged. Perhaps Wendie's former adviser senses this vulnerability and guards his impressions through refusing to engage with her beyond this encounter. Wendie references the interaction as the final "nail" in a coffin that officially seals away a corpse from view, only able to be a part of future performances through others' re-performances of their memories. His resistance to engage continues to the present day when he ignores her at professional meetings, as though she ceased to exist beyond their uncomfortable encounter years earlier.

At conferences he'll pretend he can't hear me
like *I'm* talking too quietly
and you *know* I don't speak quietly (sigh)

Wendie's former adviser refusal to engage allows his interpretations of Wendie's body and professional identity to be reiterated without struggle on his behalf. In contrast, Wendie's struggle continues, her narrative performance is a space to resist the prior meanings that emerged during their "disappointing interaction(s)." Her former adviser holds a significantly larger role in her narrative of post-accident professional identity than the adviser with whom she completed her degree. Perhaps, because unfair assumptions and rejection re-surface in subsequent interactions, compelling her to re-cite past meanings as she constitutes her unfair struggle to perform post-accident professionalism.

Wendie's former adviser's perceptions of her remain stagnant years later. However, as **Margaret's** narrative performance illuminates, meanings and understandings are forever vulnerable to change, allowing our identities to morph through ongoing interactions. Margaret, after a toboggan accident in her late teens, went on to work for park services and eventually become a director. Margaret's hire was facilitated rather than hindered by her post-accident embodiment. Professional gatekeepers allowed her to legitimately occupy a position within an organization based on an initiative to hire more people within her perceived cultural category: "they were looking for *that type of thing*." So Margaret's post-accident body was hired intentionally because of her atypicality, and placed within a position of leadership. Margaret reiterated throughout her narrative that her post-accident body did not hinder her ability to excel at her position, "It was never really an issue to speak of." She told the following story to exemplify her assertion:

Um I remember the everglades boss I had for about 4 years
I went home for lunch one day
and um I got a flat tire on the wheelchair while I was at home
so I called him I said
“Roger I’m gonna be a little late but I’ll be back as soon as I can”
I said “I have a flat tire”
He said “well let me come and help you”
and I said “oh, no it’s easy” I said “it’s no problem”
He said “*oh no*”
he said “I’ve got this jack that’ll pump the car up in *two minutes*”
and I said “well it’s not my car
I said the “flat is on *my wheelchair*” (laugh)
and he said “*ah geez*”
“*I FORGOT you know*” (laugh)

Margaret laughs throughout this portion of her narrative, actively performing both her boss Roger and herself as distinct characters with Roger’s voice being slightly deeper and slower-paced than her own. Margaret is amused that her boss forgot she was in a wheelchair, assuming that her flat tire was on her car and that he could chivalrously rescue her from with the necessary tools, (perhaps inciting dominant gender roles of a male ‘rescuing’ a female from distress). She laughs when she performs herself, needing to remind Roger that she gets flat tires that he does not. Margaret seems to enjoy the telling the story in which her performance of post-accident – which initially helped her gain employment – becomes so irrelevant in her daily interactions that her boss momentarily forgets that she requires a wheelchair to move through space. Roger’s oversight does not alter Margaret’s embodiment. She still will be late and will still need her wheelchair in order to arrive back at work despite his assumption that the wheels in her life are tantamount to the wheels in his own. Her post-accident body impacts her daily experience despite his impressions. That said, her story crystallizes how through repeated performances our understandings of one another can potentially shift and characteristics that were once at the forefront can be rendered less significant as new meanings surface. Unlike Wendie, Margaret’s post-accident body is embraced and even forgotten in the professional space.

Rejecting Identity: Performing the Correction of an ‘Accidental Hire’ of a Post-Accident Professional

In contrast to Margaret, Wendie’s post-accident performance continually emerges as detrimental to her professional relationships. Like when she chose to go back to graduate school, Wendie chooses not to disclose her disability to her potential new colleagues during her interview. Familiar understandings resurface in Wendie’s daily interactions and she is again pushed to the periphery of her professional culture. After

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an initial, enthusiastic welcome, her colleagues deem her a ‘mistake’ or ‘accident’ that must be corrected through termination despite her arguable success:

You only need to publish sixty percent of *one* paper
versus like *four* a year at an Ivy
So um anyway so I chose here because I thought I do that
and I could *double* it
so I wouldn’t have a problem getting tenure
even with any limitations I might have
from my back
or if I decided to start a family on my own since I was getting older (sigh)
I mean I wanted to live in rural area but I really
so I did have some parameters on where I would apply for jobs but I got
I’m published *two and a half times* the number of papers I needed to get tenure
And I DIDN’T get tenure (sigh)

Wendie’s voice slightly wavered as she began this portion of the narrative. Her pace was slow and her voice cracked as she reached the end. As her present audience, (also physically disabled (though congenital) and beginning to write the dissertation that would hopefully allow me to begin a nationwide search for a tenure-track position) I found my own heart racing for/with her. Three years later, my heart once again began to beat faster as I took on the role of her active audience, co-performing meaning and understanding through my empathy. Like in graduate school, when on the job market, Wendie still appears not only able-bodied, but lean and muscular. While writing her dissertation, she engaged in alternative yoga therapy that allowed her to sit for up to thirty minutes before her back convulsed in debilitating spasms. This made her embodiment less of a perceived disruption in her professional performance than when she first began graduate school. In addition, her degree from a top doctoral program and some high profile national awards allowed her to gain multiple on-campus interviews and two job offers: one from an urban Ivy League institution and one from a smaller state university located on a rural town next to a river. She readily chose the latter school because she reasoned that the quaint location and lesser research obligations would allow her to easily meet expectations despite her injury and desire to raise a family as a single parent⁴ (which she hoped to start while pursuing tenure through artificial insemination).

During the six months between when Wendie accepted the position and when she arrived at her new institution, she found out about a new surgery that could heal her injury. However, this treatment would require a two-year recovery period in which her

⁴ Wendie’s performance of gender as a single mother by sperm donor potentially interacts with her performance of post-accident identity, and in turn, an ‘accidental hire,’ though no character in her narrative disclosed this reason for not granting her tenure. In the confines of this essay, this portion of her story will not be explored though it should not be dismissed as irrelevant.

mobility would be severely compromised and she would need both a new work station that would allow her to remain standing and assistants to help her set up her office and conduct research. She informed her new chair of her needs about three months before her contract began. When she arrived that August, her colleagues' feelings toward her had shifted; they appeared weary of her and avoided interaction. She performed the culmination of this tension through a conversation with her chair:

I ended up feeling that this guy who had been *so excited to hire me*
and had been so pleasant until I had my back surgery um
and I said (deep breath)
"what is going on?
I *feel* like
I don't know
there's a whole different interaction I don't understand"
and his response was
"I feel like it it's clear to me that you're fundamentally dishonest
because you did not disclose WHO YOU WERE
when you *applied* for the job" (sigh)
Now you may or may not know
but there's 30 days for me to file *a formal complaint* against him
accusing him of violating my rights
my right to *not disclose a disability*
sexual orientation
religion
whatever right?
but *instead*
since *this IS actually*
he was *actually* the guy on the map
he was the *only* person in the department that
I had read his work while I was in grad student
so even though he didn't interact with the people I was studying with
I was at the top school for climate change and environmental science
NASSA gave 50 awards one year
to graduate students working on global change
25 went to *my* school our school's students
okay so I was in that group
I got one

Wendie raises her naturally deeper female voice when performing this interaction, she comes across as meek, pleading, and confused. In contrast, she deepens her voice to perform her department chair. His voice is even and cool, I had chills as I re-listened to this excerpt from her narrative. Her performance of him is a sharp contrast to the performance of her naïve graduate student colleagues and initial graduate adviser; this

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character surfaces as cool and calculated rather than unassuming. Wendie performs herself high pitched and shaky so that her voice sounds weaker and vulnerable in comparison. Unlike in her interaction with her first adviser, Wendie performs herself as aware of her rights but she still she opts not to bring them up to her chair in hopes of salvaging an opportunity to collaborate in research with him in the future. She legitimizes him as high caliber through citing him as the one person in the department worthy of collaboration. His success is reified through her knowledge of him during her own prestigious training which further validates herself as a legitimate hire and successful colleague. While Wendie seeks to maintain a connection to the chair, she performs him as dividing himself and the department from her. He positions her as an ‘accidental hire’ that they unknowingly and unjustly brought into their department, a mistake to be corrected.

Wendie goes on to perform her chair’s revealing an alternative performance that would have been possible if she had not been deceitful and allowed gatekeepers to choose the terms through which she is granted the opportunity to perform professionalism through a marginalized body:

He said
“You didn’t tell us you were back injured
you know
that you had this back injury
and I said well it’s you know
I’m allowed to keep that you know confidential
And he said
*“If we’d had known we would have held back some of your start up money
to pay for all this STUFF you need (pause)*
I didn’t tell him that
*“you can’t do that
That that’s
discrimination” (sigh)*
I didn’t then
Because like I said
I wanted to get along with him
To have him on my side if I’m going to stay here (sigh)
so anyway
so I’m hard to get along with
“that’s why I didn’t get tenure” apparently
but um anyway
pretty pissed off about it
still although not so depressed about it
um because I
you know did my job
and I wanted to live here

and I chose to live here for a variety of reasons
and even though I don't happen to have a job here
you know
I'm
I'm if the university doesn't reverse the decision (sigh)
We'll see how that goes just trying to figure out how to stay
so I'm disappointed that they get to choose
So I'm going to go to court

Wendie performs her chair's voice higher in this vignette than the one before. He emerges as obstinate, unreasonable, even childlike. Wendie's voice is slower and deeper, there is a discernible edge and it is riddled with sighs. As she nears the ends of her narrative she is tired and pleading. The narrative is over, though the story of her post-accident professional identity will continue with an appeal to the university and perhaps in court. Wendie notes that the chair of her department offers an alternative performance. If like the other narrators included in this study, they had known the specifics of her deviant body they would have perhaps benevolently made a space for her. However, now, five years later, after her back is healed and her ability restored, they cannot forgive her perceived transgression of deceiving them into hiring her and performing her post-accident professional identity on her terms rather than theirs. She is too great of a risk, potentially capable of a performance that could harbor more disconcerting secrets. Despite surpassing the objective criteria set before her at the time of her hire, Wendie's passing post-accident body's professional performance continues to unsettle them, and perhaps in an effort to restore power, they are no longer willing to engage. Wendie continues to resist their assessments, challenging her colleagues' roles as gatekeepers with her decision to appeal within and potentially beyond the organization in an effort to dismantle that which she sees as unjust.

Fearing Embodied Identity: Grappling with Mortality in Post-Accident Professional Performance

The chair positions Wendie's deceit as the department's reasoning for deeming her too great a risk to keep on as a colleague, that she did not reveal "*who she [was]*" when applying for the position. However, as **Sarah's** narrative will exemplify, despite actions taken to manage the disruption of bodies, the vulnerability of the flesh cannot be completely diminished. Bodies that defy the discipline and control expected in performances of professionalism are potentially met with resistance even without a perceived element of deceit. Across cultural performances, bodies that compel us to face the 'professionally uncomfortable' understanding that *bodies matter*, potentially unsettle us.

Sarah was hired as an assistant professor of disability studies and social work after a spinal cord injury that caused her to walk atypically. After receiving tenure, she developed Ramsey's Syndrome which compromised her balance, caused facial

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paralysis, and blurred her vision. When she was willingly hired as a disabled body with expertise in relation to her stigmatized cultural identity, her atypical gait was not interpreted as disruptive to professional performance since it required no accommodations. Despite her change in ability, at the time of her narrative, Sarah has yet to ask her department for any accommodations, yet, she senses the tension surrounding the impending needs of her changing post-accident body:

I think that people have been concerned that *I'm gonna* request disability accommodations
which I've not done (soft laugh)
um other than to have a little foot stool and exerciser under my desk
and a place
a chair to rest
I um
but I think that people
my experience at *this* university has been that people are concerned
concerned that *they're gonna be asked* to do something as an accommodation.
I get that through conversations
as well as direct conflicts
you know
confrontations like
"WHAT NEXT?"
you know?
or "*what are YOU gonna ask*"
and so a lot of um issues around equality of salary and workload
um I think have
ultimately for other people
been colored by "*what she gonna ask us for?*"
as a disability accommodation
I had this one woman
When I emailed to get my class changed to a room
I could get to during class change time
One that was closer
She asked
"*What's next?*"
Like there's going to be a *next* (soft laugh)
But there hasn't
Not *yet* (soft laugh –knock on table)

Sarah's delivery is marked with soft laughs as well as a slight sharpness that I interpreted as irritation. Like Wendie, she senses her colleagues' hostilities, but unlike Wendie she never confronts, and is never forced to struggle over her role in the professional space. As a tenured professor she is not vulnerable to dismissal, she is

amused and irritated at their seemingly inappropriate response, but not threatened. Her body's potential disruption to the preferred performance of professionalism unsettles others, but does not leave her anxious. Sarah's final words draw attention to her understanding of the inescapable vulnerability of embodiment. She perhaps will need more adaptations to her daily performance, like those around her she hopes not (knocks on the table), but the potential is there. Unlike the other narrators in this essay, Sarah and Wendie's bodies cannot be carefully contained and managed in the professional space at the time of their narratives which spurs anxiety for their colleagues. The responses of the characters in their narratives crystallize our shared cultural discomfort with the post-accident professional body. These bodies serve as continual reminders that our seemingly 'normal' bodies can in one moment become deviant like Wendie's back injury or Sarah's onset of Ramsey's Syndrome. In these cases, (of passing ability and changed ability) we are forced to face the vulnerability of our bodies and the discomfort in our own inescapably susceptible fleshed state for which we can really never completely prepare. These disabled bodies defy the professional's culture's attempts to manage them. Wendie's restored pre-accident ability did not ease her colleagues' resentment toward the disruption of her pre-accident body and Sarah's current role as a tenured expert in disabled bodies does not make the abrupt altering of her body and its potential disruption to the professional space palatable. Our shared cultural discomfort with the vulnerability of human bodies, and in turn, the identities we perform through them, re-surfaces across their stories. Resistance to post-accident bodies blurring the boundaries intended for them in professional spaces crystallizes a cultural unease with bodies that remind us of our own fleshed vulnerability. This realization is particularly disconcerting in spaces where we strive to render the body irrelevant. Post-accident bodies remind us that we, like them, could be forever changed, our bodies and in turn the identities we perform through them abruptly and irrevocably revised without our consents. Bodies that defy efforts to manage their atypicality potentially reaffirms that our bodies could also become unmanageable.

Re-Performing Resistive Identity: Performing Post-Accident Identity Post-Employment

I had the unexpected opportunity to participate in the epilogue to Wendie's post-accident professional identity story three years after our initial encounter, six months after her court settlement. Wendie's situation had changed since her interview. She technically 'won' her lawsuit and received settlement from the university. She was currently working as an independent environmental consultant so that she and her twin boys could stay living in the area she liked despite her not being employed at the university. The following scripted scene is a re-performance of that encounter based on my memories and notes immediately after, created with Wendie's approval:

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My partner Evan and I sit in a corner booth by the door of a brick oven pizza and local brewery in a tourist town. We're on vacation near where I interviewed Wendie three years earlier. I'm holding our son on my lap while we're waiting for our to-go box and emptying our pints of summer wheat ale when a familiar face comes down the stairs. Wendie, flanked by two thin boys, each with a thick head of long brown-blond hair come toward us. Wendie looks the same, perhaps thinner, but still tan with short cropped dark curls, a lean build, hiking shorts, a light t-shirt, and her Texas.

Wendie: *(walking toward me)* Is that you? Hi! What are you doing here?

Me: Hi Wendie, It's so great to see you. We're in the area for a few weeks. How are you?

Wendie: Okay. I went to court. The settlement wasn't anything though.

Me: Oh, so are you not working there now?

Wendie: No, not now. Not ever. *(sigh)* To settle I had to sign an agreement promising never to work there again. I shouldn't have signed it. It wasn't really that much considering. It's the only game in town here. I have a consulting business now. But really I shouldn't have ruined my chances for applying there later if something opened up. How are you doing? I heard you got a job.

Me: Yeah, I just finished my first year.

Wendie: Tenure track?

Me: Yeah, I'm on maternity leave this semester though, so it's pushed back a year. This is Evan. *(Evan smiles and shakes Wendie's hand.)* And this is Tony *(I lift Tony up above the top of the table so she can get a better look at him)*

Wendie: Hi Tony! How do they feel about it, about Tony I mean, you having him so early in your career?

Me: Everyone's been really supportive so far. Tony was a surprise. *(Evan and I laugh)*

Wendie: Yeah, the kids didn't get in the way of my productivity. That really wasn't the issue *(pause)*

Me: I feel really lucky.

Wendie: Well, I know some people who knew you in high school. Remember? Remember, I told you about how I knew some people that knew you. They said that people have always liked you. I can see that.

Me: *(nervous laugh)* I hope so. I guess you never know really.

Wendie: People let you know. You know. You'll do well. I really shouldn't have taken the settlement, not with the stipulation I can't apply to work there ever again. They really are the only game in town. I shouldn't have signed it, but I did. I needed to be done.

Evan: I'll meet you outside. Take your time. *(Evan kisses me quickly, scoops up our son, and walks out the door)*

Me: I'm sorry Wendie. I was hoping for different news.

Wendie: Yeah, me too. It's what I figured it would be though. I didn't want it to be and I did all I could, but really it doesn't surprise me. (*Wendie's boys begin to shuffle back and forth, looking up at her.*) Oh well. I shouldn't have said I wouldn't work there though. It's really the only game in town if something comes up. It's good seeing you though. Keep in touch. You'll do well. People like you. (*sigh*)

Me: You're pretty likeable yourself. It's really nice seeing you.

Wendie: If people like me, they just like me better somewhere else. Not with them. (*dry laugh*)

Me: I'm so sorry.

Wendie: Hey, I gotta go. Do you still have my cell?

Me: Yeah.

Wendie: Text me your new email.

Me: I definitely will

Wendie's two boys bound down the stairs of the restaurant. I take out my phone and see her number still there, though I haven't called it since I showed her the final draft of the dissertation. I text my email and the next day ask her if she's willing to allow me to include this conversation in an epilogue for a special issue of a journal. She texts back "Yes" quite quickly. We become facebook friends a few weeks later.

My exchange with Wendie felt awkward. Her phrases came quickly, but felt strained. I wanted to ask her why she did not leave the place where so many hurtful memories took place knowing that she could have easily found employment elsewhere, but I refrained. I remembered she had told me that she chose the location specifically, that she liked the town and had wanted to raise her children there. Perhaps after being forced out of her professional role, choosing to stay allowed her to maintain some sense of self-determination and I did not want to risk undermining that with my questions.

In some ways, through winning a settlement and successfully starting her own business, one could interpret the epilogue of Wendie's performance as a happy ending. Her department and the university were held responsible for her personal damages and required to pay restitution. However, as Wendie reiterated several times in our short exchange, she sees the university as "the only game in town" she is now banned from participating in. she feels a sense of loss, like interactions with her graduate student colleagues and former doctoral adviser, her future professional performances have been restricted which hinders the forming of new meanings. The agreement emerges as regretful 'accident' that like the unfair judgments of her former graduate colleagues, adviser, and chair she will not be given an opportunity to dismantle in future performances. Wendie's body, now fully recovered and achieving professional success defined by all objective measures remains an 'accidental hire.' Allowing her access remains a mistake so grave her former employer asks for a

tangible defense against repeating the accident in a different professional performance context.

Throughout our exchange, without my asking, Wendie repeatedly assures me that I do not need to fear re-performing her story. She asserts that despite my disabled body and motherhood before tenure, my professional performance will not reiterate her own. Perhaps sensing my empathy she felt compelled to comfort me that her story does not transcend to similar embodied performances. However, despite Wendie's efforts to assure me that her story is not mine, the responses to Wendie are not isolated to her personal experience. Rather, they stem from deeply rooted cultural discourses that compel the exclusion, management, or termination of stigmatized, abnormal bodies stigmatized within professional spaces. The understandings that surfaced across the narratives in this study are not confined to certain bodies but re-emerge across human interactions as we engage in the discursive struggle of meaning-making. Bodies that blur these seemingly set identity boundaries provide a means to trace the surfacing of meanings through performativity that we may normally disregard.

Conclusion: Understanding Ourselves through Our Reactions to Post-Accident Identity

Performance acts function as "a cultural means of objectifying and laying open to scrutiny culture itself" (Bauman, 47). Through analyzing the personal narratives of post-accident professional identity this essay illuminates the struggle over the post-accident performance of professionalism. Tensions surround bodies that abruptly shift from 'normal/able' to 'abnormal/disabled.' Post-accident bodies serve as tangible reminders that anyone, at any moment – despite varying genetics and personal histories – can be drastically altered through changed embodiment.

Most of the narrators were able to achieve success through performing within the confines of roles designated for deviant bodies. Wendie potentially incites the most intense cultural conflicts because her daily performance of passing disabled identity holds her pre- and post-accident identities in an unresolved tension, continually reminding others of who she was, who she is, and that they too could change in an instant. Her body cannot easily be categorized as 'disabled' upon first encounter which allows others to co-identify her as one of them and thus, forces them to face that they too, in one moment could change forever through one accidental performance act. Perhaps this unsettling understanding sheds insight into why even after her pre-accident ability is restored and she is able to reach all objective criteria for tenure she is awarded a cash settlement rather than an offer to resume her daily professional performance. Perhaps it is not Wendie's passing post-accident body's 'deceitful' performance but her continual fleshed reminder that our familiar performances of self are vulnerable to change in a moment, without warning, forever altering our identities. Performances of professionalism allow us to be termed productive, valued members of society with resources to facilitate our comfort and

safety. Perhaps finding ways to allow professional performance across bodies, creating policies, roles, and physical space that flexes around and morph with – rather than ghettoizes or expels – the changing bodies within it could ease our discomfort with the performance of post-accident bodies. With our acceptance of others’ embodied vulnerability perhaps we will also learn to accept the inevitability of our own bodies to change, whether abruptly through one daily performance act, or slowly over the course of time.

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