

My Intersecting Quests as a Disabled Independent Scholar

Tekla Babyak

My life is shaped by two intersecting quests: advocacy for disabled scholars and advocacy for independent scholars. I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 2011, on the cusp of finishing my dissertation at Cornell University and entering the job market. I successfully completed my PhD, but the job market remains inaccessible to me. In light of the ableism that prevails in academia, I do not trust any institution to give me the accommodations that I would need in order to handle the stress of academic employment. My condition, however, is sufficiently under control to enable me to present at conferences, engage in service to the American Musicological Society, and publish my work on nineteenth-century German and French musical hermeneutics. One of my central goals is to fight against the barriers that make academia an inhospitable climate for disabled and independent scholars, two groups whose potential is often unrecognized.

Recognition, as Judith Butler (2005, 30) has observed, is often structured by questions that rely on rigid assumptions, norms, and expectations. At conference networking events, the question that shapes and troubles my own scenes of recognition is “where do you teach?” When this question is addressed to me, I am forced to introduce myself through negation: “I’m an independent scholar with a PhD in musicology from Cornell.”

Upon learning that I do not have an academic position, my would-be conversation partners sometimes hurriedly excuse themselves to “get a drink” (in other words, to network with someone who is perceived as having higher status). My contributions frequently earn me the respect of my peers when they hear my conference papers or read my publications. However, in the eyes of those who are not yet familiar with my work, my lack of an academic position fosters an initial impression of me as a failed scholar. On one occasion, at the beginning of a roundtable discussion, the chairperson publicly described me as being “in limbo” after I had introduced myself as an independent scholar.

These microaggressions make me feel the need to justify and defend my lack of an affiliation. It has thus become standard practice for me to supplement my introductory statement by adding, “I have a disabling chronic illness, multiple sclerosis, that prevents me from holding down an academic job.” (In fact, I’ve also

taken to including this statement in my bio for conferences and publications.) I have found that this disclosure of my (mostly) invisible disabilities generally leads academics to treat me more respectfully, or at least *compassionately*, than would be the case if I allowed myself to pass as able-bodied.

What is happening here? How could one marginalized identity--that of a disabled person--mitigate the stigma of another marginalized identity, that of an independent scholar? Theorists of intersectionality often contend that the intersection of two stigmatized identities is a doubly marginalizing force. Yet my experience of intersectionality is that academics are less likely to respond rudely to my lack of an affiliation when I inform them that I have multiple sclerosis. This increase in kindness helps me feel safer and more accepted.

Yet this kindness is perhaps not entirely something to be celebrated. It is likely inflected by ableist attitudes involving pity, along with a patronizing sense of admiration for the fact that a disabled person can even *be* a scholar at all. I have also noticed that many academics are more willing to “forgive” my lack of an academic affiliation when they discover that it is the result of a disabling condition and thus not “my fault.” It is as though my disabilities grant me absolution from the shame of academic unemployment. This way of thinking, all too prevalent in academic circles, is analogous to the disturbing way in which homophobes and transphobes are only willing to “tolerate” LGBT people if the orientation is viewed as something unchangeable and innate.

Integrating the Independent Scholar

One of my activist goals is to fight for the fuller participation of independent scholars in academic activities. As a member of the AMS Council and the Committee on the Annual Meeting, I continually advocate for policies to ensure more equitable treatment for disabled and independent scholars. Moreover, I often contact editors and conference organizers to advocate for the inclusion of independent scholars in activities such as serving on editorial boards, writing book reviews, contributing to edited collections, giving keynotes, and chairing panels.

The current selection process for many of these activities tends to operate on the basis of invitations and commissions rather than open calls for applicants. Such invitation-only systems are liable to perpetuate bias (against scholars with disabilities, independent scholars, scholars of color, etc.) in terms of whose names are put forward as candidates for invitation. Although many of my peers have expressed admiration for my work, I am not invited to contribute to edited

collections or to give departmental talks to an extent commensurate with my qualifications.¹

A central aspect of my battle against this discrimination involves my quest for independent musicologists to be more profoundly integrated into the social and intellectual lives of their nearby music departments. To this end, I am working toward the formation of radically de-institutionalized departmental cultures, in which independent scholars would be invited to give guest lectures, attend faculty gatherings, and even serve as external members on dissertation committees. The modes of interaction that I am envisioning are indebted to the notion of queer kinship. Queer theorists such as Elizabeth Freeman have observed that LGBT individuals often forge quasi-familial bonds of closeness that exist outside the heterosexual structures of kinship. Similarly, I am calling for universities to build alliances with independent scholars in ways that transcend the neoliberal capitalist logic of employment and affiliation.

Firm Handshakes and Straight Backs: Ableist Guidelines in Academia

If you look up terms such as “job interview” or “public speaking” on the internet, you will find yourself bombarded with rules about how to stand, move, and behave. Stand up straight. Don’t slouch. Don’t fidget. Maintain eye contact. Shake the interviewer’s hand firmly and vigorously (in the pre-Covid times when handshakes were a central ritual in social interactions, and the strength of the grip was used to judge a candidate’s suitability for the job). These guidelines are rife with ableist assumptions. They assume (and hence privilege) an able-bodied speaker whose body is able to perform the set of moves that are coded in mainstream society as signs of confidence and competence. Bodies whose patterns of behavior fall outside this repertoire of norms are deemed unemployable.

To be sure, many of these guidelines are found on corporate and business-oriented websites. One might hope that the academic world, with all its talk about diversity and inclusion, would take a less prescriptive approach to body language. Regrettably, though, iterations of the same ableist norms frequently crop up in academia. In 2018, the American Musicological Society guidelines for presenters featured a link to an article by Linda Kerber (2008), “Conference Rules: How to Present a Scholarly Paper.” Kerber’s article teems with ableist advice that marginalizes the conference presenters who do not (or *cannot*) orchestrate their bodily movements in accordance with her rules.

Current Musicology

For instance, she asserts that standing is vastly preferable to sitting when delivering a paper: “When you are reading a paper aloud from a sitting position, it is almost impossible to have eye contact with the audience unless you interrupt the flow of what you are saying. You cannot take as deep a breath, or project your voice as powerfully, as when you are standing.” Her implication is that a person who uses a wheelchair, or has difficulty standing for the length of a conference paper, is a less effective communicator.

Kerber’s idealization of the upright posture has a long pedigree. Centuries before all the hype around the so-called power pose, the first-century Roman poet Ovid asserted that the upright stance allows humans to experience divine intimations of transcendence: “In likeness of the gods that govern the world--and while the other creatures on all four look downwards, man was made to hold his head erect in majesty and see the sky, and raise his eyes to the bright stars above.” (1998, 3). Ovid’s disparaging reference to animality suggests that the ableist injunction to stand up straight is rooted in an anxious desire to distinguish humans from animals.

Speech is another faculty that has often been idealized as the privileged domain of human beings. In the eighteenth century, Jean-Jacques Rousseau proclaimed that “speech distinguishes man among the animals” (1966, 5). As such, speech, like posture, is subject to ableist forms of policing. Kerber’s article emphasizes the importance of practicing a paper out loud until a fluent delivery has been achieved (“no tripping over pronunciations, no wrong intonation” as she puts it). By touting a flawless linguistic performance as the ultimate goal of conference preparation and presentation, Kerber’s article discriminates against the scholars who might stutter or experience other hesitations in spite of repeated practice.

I first became aware of Kerber’s article in August 2018, while perusing the AMS website in preparation for my presentation at the annual meeting. Disturbed by this set of rules to which my disabled body could not consistently conform, I sent an email to the AMS explaining that Kerber’s ableist language did not align with the equitable principles that our society espouses. My activism proved successful: the AMS president and board moved swiftly to remove the article from the website.

Ableist guidelines, however, continue to be promoted on many academic websites, including the convention interview guidelines set forth by the Modern Language Association (2020). This document, which instructs candidates to make eye contact, thus implicitly urges interviewers to evaluate this aspect of the candidate’s behavior. Assessment along these lines relies on an ableist metric that

does not take disabled bodies into account. Many people on the autism spectrum find eye contact difficult and even painful. Moreover, people with certain neurological conditions cannot always maintain a fixed gaze—and candidates who are visually impaired might not even be able to see the interviewer's eyes at all.

Psychological disabilities are another target of discrimination in this MLA document, which instructs candidates to “be aware of nervousness.” The implication is that the candidate should aim to put on a performance of anxiety-free confidence. This imposes an unfair burden on all job candidates, especially in light of the precarious and anxiety-inducing state of today's job market. But it is especially unfair, to the point of being discriminatory, for candidates with disabling forms of anxiety disorders. Instead of depicting nervousness as something shameful that needs to be hidden, it would be better to encourage interviewers not to penalize candidates for showing signs of anxiety.

In July 2020, I emailed the contact people listed for this document to explain my concerns about its ableist rhetoric. However, as of November 2020, I have not heard back from them, and the document remains unchanged. The MLA's refusal to address the issue of this problematic document is deplorable. The abolition of these ableist guidelines would constitute an important step toward the fuller inclusion of disabled people in faculty positions. In “The Neglected Demographic: Faculty Members with Disabilities,” Joseph Grigely (2017) notes that only 1.5 percent of faculty members at UC Berkeley are disabled, a figure which he rightly describes as “discouraging, given that 22 percent of the general population has disabilities.” Contributing to the extreme underrepresentation of disabled faculty members is the fact that, as Grigely observes, “[f]ew colleges have an accommodations officer who is trained to serve faculty members.”

If we lived in a world in which accommodation needs were honored, and candidates would not be judged on the basis of non-normative body language, then I would likely be empowered to pursue academic employment. Until such a world comes into being, I will continue to add my voice to the coalition of activists who strive toward the formation of that world.

Notes

¹ There are, however, some welcome exceptions to this pattern of exclusion. See my CV at <https://hcommons.org/members/tekla/> for a list of the edited collections and themed journal issues in which I actually *have* been invited to participate.

References

- Butler, Judith. 2005. *Giving an Account of Oneself*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Grigely, Joseph. 2017. "The Neglected Demographic: Faculty Members with Disabilities," in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 27 June 2017.
<https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-neglected-demographic-faculty-members-with-disabilities/>, accessed December 23, 2020.
- Kerber, Linda. 2008. "Conference Rules: How to Present a Scholarly Paper," in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. 21 March 2008. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/conference-rules-how-to-present-a-scholarly-paper/>, accessed December 23, 2020.
- Modern Languages Association. 2020. "Recommended Guidelines for Interviews for Academic Positions." <https://www.mla.org/Resources/Career/Career-Resources/Dos-and-Don-ts-for-MLA-Convention-Interviews>, accessed December 23, 2020.
- Ovid. 1998. *Metamorphoses*, Book 1. Translated by A.D. Melville. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. 1966 [1781]. *Essay on the Origin of Languages*. Translated by John H. Moran and Alexander Gode. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.