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The Disabled Lens: Viewing Gender Performance

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Recommended Citation

Marr, Dorian, "The Disabled Lens: Viewing Gender Performance" (2023). *Dean James E. McLeod Freshman Writing Prize*. 22.

<https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/mcleod/22>

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CWP 114 Writing Identity

26 April 2023

The Disabled Lens: Viewing Gender Performance

Black Metal, Trauma, Subjectivity and Sound: Screaming the Abyss is Jasmine Shadrack's performance autoethnography—in this, she explains her experiences and the sociocultural phenomena that shaped them through the lens of her black metal career. She focuses on her role as guitarist and frontwoman of black metal band Denigrata. Shadrack's onstage persona is Denigrata Herself, which allows her to experiment with her gender presentation and portray aspects of her trauma and disabilities in a way she is comfortable with. As the pain from her complex post-traumatic stress disorder (C-PTSD) and fibromyalgia increased, Shadrack eventually had to leave Denigrata.

Due to her connection to Denigrata Herself, she continued to create black metal inspired photography dressed as her persona. Through doing this, she found a way to continue expressing both gender and disability in a way that felt most authentic to her. Discovering this was a long and arduous process, made ever more difficult due to holding two socially devalued states. Due to society's failure to acknowledge disabled experiences, disabled people exist outside of the demands of 'femininity' and 'masculinity'—thus, disabled people cannot fully find a place within socially constructed gender roles, leading to both internal and external conflicts and a fundamentally different experience embodying gender.

Disabled people live beyond the bounds of social acceptability or imaginability. In her research “Almost Passing: A Performance Analysis of Personal Narratives of Physically

Disabled Femininity,” Scott analyzes the stories and experiences of seven physically disabled women that almost pass. There are two main groups of women in Scott’s study: women that pass if they avoid situations in which their disability is evident, and women that are always perceived as having some disability or injury, though it is often mis-identified. While the study was originally focused on the experiences of young disabled professionals, the common themes of the narratives led Scott to focus on how these women’s disabled identities impacted their performances of womanhood. Scott acknowledges that her connection to the subject matter, as another almost-passing physically disabled woman, may have encouraged her subjects to share these experiences, as they play an important role in their lives, but are difficult to discuss with those who cannot relate (230). Throughout her work, Scott develops a framework for how society understands disability and how this alters outsiders’ perceptions of her subjects’ gender.

Leaning on Thomson’s work, Scott utilizes the idea that disability is defined as an absence of ‘normal’. “[D]isability, unlike race and gender, is not based on ‘predictable and observable traits’ but on any deviation from what we consider normal” (Scott 228). In terms of gender, while ‘woman’ is a socially devalued category, it is still a category—there are certain performances and roles expected of women. This is less true for disability. There is a social category of ‘normal’—being able-bodied, neurotypical, following social norms, etc. Disability has no set definition. When someone identifies that another person is disabled, they realize that they don’t conform to certain social expectations, say by being unable to complete particular tasks. The person can then be labelled as failing to meet the physical demands of their society. However, since few markers or expectations exist to label disability directly, disability is generally seen as a failure to perform able-bodiedness, not its own performance.

While Shadrack and Scott's subjects share womanhood and disability status, as Shadrack's fibromyalgia developed, she was no longer able to pass as non-disabled. Shadrack describes herself as a 'spoonie,' an identity developed in chronically ill communities to describe the limits to one's energy and physical capacities as they fluctuate over time (Shadrack 187). Shadrack's experiences with chronic illness add an understanding of how individuals manage constructing their identity while their lives are constantly mediated by their levels of pain and energy. Shadrack expressing her own experiences is an opportunity often not afforded to disabled people, providing valuable knowledge for how disabled people articulate their own narratives and identities. Additionally, as a musical artist, her expression of gender and ability was done more purposefully and with more outside scrutiny.

With disability being an impossible social category, disability cannot be fully included in definitions of other social constructs. Femininity and masculinity are only fully applicable to the non-disabled. While disabled people can certainly navigate these demands, they cannot be fully accepted within them. This is particularly evident for Simon, the subject of "How to Be a Man Differently: The Intersection of Gender and Disability in the Life Course of a Powerchair Athlete." Born with Duchenne muscular dystrophy, Simon was never capable of meeting the demands of hegemonic masculinity, which the study's authors Paccaud and Marcellini define as the behaviors that reinforce the domination of women by men and the social hierarchy within among men (583).

Beginning at a young age, Simon could not interact as an equal with other boys, preventing him from constructing a "masculine sense of self" (Paccaud and Marcellini 583). However, when interacting with other disabled men, as he did in his powerchair hockey team, he finally had a chance to approximate hegemonic masculinity. Hockey allowed him to participate

in an activity centered around competition and physical skill, allowing Simon to develop a masculine sense of self. Additionally, Simon gained independence through learning to drive and being the webmaster for the hockey team. Despite these approximations of hegemonic masculinity, Simon could never be perceived as masculine by others (Paccaud and Marcellini 595). According to Paccaud and Marcellini, “the body plays a central role in others recognizing good compliance with gender norms. Physical abilities that are socially expected for one’s ‘sex category’ constitute an important dimension of ... being perceived by others as properly gendered” (584). Simon’s body is fundamentally viewed as non-masculine by others, as he cannot meet the physical demands of hegemonic masculinity. The body is the canvas through which gender is performed, and disability warps this canvas.

The pushback disabled women meet when failing to conform to gendered expectations differ from Simon’s experiences. Women’s disability often simultaneously heightened their femininity and made them incapable of fully performing the physical demands of womanhood. Rhonda is a woman who bases a large portion of her identity in being a woman with a stereotypically masculine frame and voice (Scott 231). However, once others learn of her rheumatoid arthritis, they view her as more feminine, as she is ‘weaker’ in their view (Scott 232). This feminization appears against Rhonda’s will, as she is hesitant and uncomfortable when describing this phenomenon, as she frequently pauses and laughs awkwardly while describing her experiences (Scott 232).

From this, I gather that Rhonda places a lot of pride in being a more masculine woman. She wants to be seen as just as strong and capable as her male counterparts, yet is viewed as fragile, and thus, more feminine. Within Judith Butler’s theory of gender performance, this speaks to the fact that gender performance can never be entirely in one’s control, as that

performance depends on societal standards. “[T]here are nuanced and individual ways of *doing* one's gender, but *that* one does it ... *in accord with* certain sanctions and proscriptions, is clearly not a fully individual matter” (Butler, *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution* 525, emphasis in original). These expectations have developed in response to social standards and historical developments, leading to complex networks of ever-changing gendered meanings individuals must navigate. Individuals are perceived and judged by the standards of these sanctions, with little regard for how one sees themselves or would like to be perceived. One can alter their gender performance, but not how performances are perceived. This is particularly evident for disabled people, as these sanctions are built around the ideals of able-bodiedness and neurotypicality. Thus, disabled individuals lose control over others' perceptions of their gender, as their disabilities alter their gender performance in immutable ways.

While Shadrack doesn't acknowledge this herself, she was likely similarly feminized due to her disabilities. While Shadrack incorporated a variety of gendered traits into her performance as Denigrata Herself, she only ever describes being perceived as a woman. Others acknowledged and criticized her more masculine attributes, but still solely saw her as a woman, albeit one taking up a traditionally male role. This displays the limited control one has over how one's gender is perceived. According to Judith Butler, “the gendered body acts its part in a culturally restricted corporeal space and enacts interpretations within the confines of already existing directives” (Butler, *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution* 526). These restrictions and directives define Shadrack's body as female, regardless of Shadrack viewing her performance as non-gendered. The factors that caused this feminization are strongly tied to Shadrack's trauma.

Shadrack's intimate partner abuse was heavily influenced by her being a woman and her ex-partner being a man. Thus, screaming and portraying these experiences onstage solidifies her

role as a woman. This is particularly true in a genre characterized by male violence against women—in black metal, women are often reduced to objects of desire that men have a right to abuse (Shadrack 25). Evidence of this abuse and its effects is then evidence of Shadrack's womanhood. Furthermore, Shadrack was very open about the pain caused by fibromyalgia. Pain is commonly seen as a sign of weakness, associated with femininity. While black metal embraces pain more than mainstream society, considering black metal's biases against women, anything to discredit Shadrack and her role in black metal can and will be used against her. Additionally, when the pain of fibromyalgia began to prevent Shadrack from screaming and playing guitar, she was no longer capable of holding masculine spaces onstage. Even Shadrack's descriptions of *Denigrata Herself* become more feminine after she left the band (187). Thus, despite her best efforts, others' perceptions ignore the multifaceted nature of her gender performance.

Disability interacts with gender norms even beyond the extent that it directly prevents certain gendered expressions, since outsiders confront disabilities in gendered ways. When opening up about needing certain accommodations, the women in Scott's study that passed more fully were often met with anger and disbelief, even from those closest to them (240, 245). Friends, family, and co-workers couldn't conceptualize that a person could be so capable in certain domains, yet incapable in others. Rather than their need for accommodations feminizing them, it devalued them, as women, employees, and romantic partners. Meanwhile, Simon and the less-passing women in Scott's study received pity, feminizing them, as they were perceived as weaker and in need of support. Thus, the fact that one needs accommodations, as well as the extent to which these accommodations are evident to other people, impact gender performance.

While disabilities can increase femininity in women, because disability is not included within societal definitions of gender, there are still ways in which disability works to undermine

disabled women's womanhood. Two of the women in Scott's study, Olivia and Nora, described disappointment about being unable to become a cheerleader in high school, despite being well into their professional careers (236). Both women described cheerleaders as a form of ideal womanhood, as these were the most attractive and popular women (Scott 236).

The fact that these inadequacies have persisted throughout these women's lives shows how severe the effects of failing to fully meet gender norms are. For something to have such long-lasting and dramatic effects on these women's subjectivities, substantial value must be placed on this ideal form of womanhood. Since Olivia and Nora both lacked the flexibility and coordination to be cheerleaders, they couldn't be the accomplish ideal femininity. Additionally, Patty, another woman in Scott's study, has thoracic outlet syndrome, which causes chronic pain in the areas surrounding her neck and shoulders. To mitigate this pain, she keeps her hair short and wears shoes designed to support her knees, which strain her neck and back less (Scott 239). Without these aids, it's virtually impossible for her to manage her physical pain. While she passes as able-bodied, she still faces judgement from partners, family, and friends (Scott 240) because she physically cannot meet the gendered expectations surrounding women's hair and shoes.

For each of the women in Scott's study, the failures to meet gender expectations was a source of shame. They described their disabilities as barriers to social and professional success and described putting effort into passing as able-bodied. Meanwhile, Shadrack took pride in her fibromyalgia and C-PTSD, and she incorporated important aspects of her disabilities into her onstage persona. Shadrack sought for "Denigrata Herself [to represent] the chaos of trauma through a more impressionistic re-encoding of the corpsepaint ideal" (Shadrack 139). Her corpsepaint took on a more stylized approach, emphasizing the spread of darkness, with a

disordered series of lines dripping down her face, similar to the unpredictable and wide-reaching effects of trauma.

When performing as Denigrata Herself, Shadrack intertwines her trauma with her perseverance through it. “[B]y creating an on-stage persona comprised of antlers and corpsepaint, I can put all my abusive experiences inside it and use it for my performance. These aesthetic markers help me assume the character and take ownership of the catharsis” (Shadrack 139). By incorporating her trauma, the cause of her fibromyalgia and C-PTSD, into her performance, Shadrack reframes the experiences. She is the one in power, not her abuser. She is in control over herself, creating a reality she can thrive in. Furthermore, Shadrack considers screaming itself an expression of the trauma and abuse she’s experienced.

[By] Screaming the pain out on stage ... I am able to regain control. By taking something I hate (trauma) and pushing it through something I love (black metal), this recategorizes the trauma, re-encoding it as a source of inspiration, rather than a source of emotional collapse. The physical act of screaming ... allows my trauma a voice. It is a vicious, enraged screen that vomits forth moments of hurt, pain and humiliation and in so doing, I reclaim my subjectivity (Shadrack 17).

Through screaming her trauma onstage, she acknowledges the effects abuse continues to have on her, in the form of C-PTSD and fibromyalgia. However, she takes control over this, by centering her autonomy and capacity to lead. She takes pride in her healing, while acknowledging the fact that the abuse changed her. She loves the person she’s become—a survivor of abuse and all its effects—and shows this person to the world through black metal.

The connection between Denigrata Herself and Shadrack’s disabilities became even stronger after Shadrack left Denigrata. Shadrack continued to perform as Denigrata Herself in a

new way—through crip time photography. Crip time describes “time mediated through disability” (Lamont-Jiggins 174). This includes the additional time used seeking accommodations and recovering from the pain caused by exerting oneself and existing in a world designed for the non-disabled. Crip time photography captures these moments that a society designed for non-disabled individuals actively ignores. This allows Shadrack to explore vital components of Denigrata Herself—her acquired disabilities, gender performance, and ongoing connection to the black metal aesthetic—on her own terms (186). Shadrack formed Denigrata into what she terms “the Sacred Abject” (187). In sociology, the abject is a body defined by broader society as inherently repulsive, often as a form of marginalization (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 169). Shadrack faces abjection both in terms of her gender and disabilities. To continue viewing herself and her body as worthy despite societal biases, she establishes her abject traits as sources of power for Denigrata Herself.

Throughout her crip time photography, Shadrack blends her identities, Denigrata Herself, and the power of occult goddesses to find a source of power and belonging despite her abjection. This is particularly clear in the first photograph in the series, where Shadrack depicts Denigrata Herself as Baphomet, a goddess that represents “the natural world, sexuality, and creation” (188). Shadrack describes Denigrata Herself as having traversed through the darkness and chaos of trauma to create a different, yet powerful and free, self (188). Throughout this image, she turns the phrase ‘differently abled’ on its head. Mainstream society often uses this term to attempt to lessen the blow of the term ‘disabled,’ revealing implicit biases against those of us that exist beyond non-disabled standards. Yet in this image of Denigrata Herself as Baphomet, she has sprouted wings and is flying within an abyss (Shadrack 188).

Rather than Denigrata Herself 'losing' abilities when becoming 'differently abled,' she gains power through reclaiming and redefining her abject identities. Additionally, from her corpsepaint to her cloak to Denigrata's album artwork, blackness represents trauma throughout Shadrack's work. Thus, Denigrata Herself flying through this black abyss represents the power she's gained through and over her trauma and its physical and emotional damages. It certainly took long periods of healing for Shadrack to get to this point. "Living post-abuse with a chronic illness feels like you are still being controlled by something else, some prohibitive and punitive force that robs you of choice, freedom of movement and peace" (Shadrack 182). Despite this long period of powerlessness, Shadrack began to view survival after abuse and defining life on her own terms as a source of power, which she portrayed through Denigrata Herself.

Shadrack also gained power from Denigrata Herself combining a variety of differently gendered traits and thus existing beyond societal constraints and expectations of gender. She still continues to incorporate certain feminine attributes by wearing a "long, voluminous" wig (Shadrack 151) and accentuating her body to be a sexually powerful woman on her own terms (Shadrack 188). However, Shadrack focuses most on how she subverts gender roles. "I'm not wearing a dress, makeup that enhances my features or high heels ... [My] activity is therefore focused directly in my hands and mouth, and the perceived masculinity encoded into [screaming and guitar-playing is] subverted by a woman performing them" (Shadrack 150). Thus, Shadrack largely rejects the expectations placed on women, both from broader society expecting women to dress and act in feminine coded ways and from black metal expecting women to remain as groupies and girlfriends rather than performers (Shadrack 27). Many of the traits that increased Shadrack's masculinity also portrayed her disability. While Shadrack never described her corpsepaint in gendered terms, it would be seen as masculine by broader society due to its

connection with black metal, a male-dominated genre. Thus, her screaming and corpsepaint, which portray her disabled identities, are also what masculinize her. This is a source of power for Shadrack, who, while identifying as a cisgender woman, describes not feeling like a man or a woman while performing (151) and felt emancipated by utilizing her masculine attributes onstage (54).

Interestingly, neither Simon nor the women in Scott's study ever described any aspects of their disability increasing their masculinity—disability could undermine the women's femininity, but none of them described being considered masculine as a result of being disabled. This can be linked to the ideas of hegemonic masculinity—for men's dominance in the hierarchy to be maintained, some natural strength must be associated with masculinity to justify this structure. Shadrack escapes this somewhat by performing in the black metal subculture. While black metal maintains, if not strengthens, gender hierarchies, black metal is still perceived as very masculine overall. Thus, Shadrack expressing herself within this framework automatically conveys some masculinity onto her. This is what makes Shadrack's narrative so compelling—by operating under different cultural and aesthetic ideals, she provides a vastly different perspective on the interactions between disability and gender.

Partaking in black metal subjected Shadrack and her gender expression to additional scrutiny. Black metal has established itself as a male-only space. By many in black metal, women are seen as antithetical to the shockingly restrictive genre (Shadrack 108). "Metal purports to be rebellious and anti-mainstream, but only for the demographic it serves and is relevant to: men" (Shadrack 26). In black metal, women are placed under even harsher restrictions concerning how they can participate in the subculture. Thus, Shadrack experienced substantial conflict throughout her time in *Denigrata*, from offhand sexual comments (55) to

sound engineers specifically lowering Shadrack's volume at shows (142). In these situations, Shadrack was punished for violating gender expectations.

Not only was she taking up space onstage, something explicitly defined as male-only within black metal, but she did so in a particularly masculine way. She was Denigrata's guitarist and lead vocalist, and taking up leadership roles like these enhanced her masculinity and violation of the masculinist norms of black metal. Furthermore, she faced conflict when combatting the historical trends of violence against women within black metal. Violence against women in black metal has long been documented, from violent lyrics to images of sexual assault on album covers (DiGioia 33). With Shadrack's trauma and resulting disabilities, she's worked to counteract these standards within black metal. By foregrounding her healing and power as a survivor of abuse and her identity as a disabled woman defining her own life, she works to achieve the autonomy that black metal has refused women.

Acknowledging these interactions between disability and gender supports the abject that navigates these intersections. The abject's experiences don't fit into culture's understanding of bodies or how they ought to operate in society. The resulting rejection and alienation cause significant damage to their sense of self, as described by Shadrack, Simon, and Scott's participants. Appreciating these aspects of human diversity without judging individuals through arbitrary social norms creates a more inclusive society, bypassing the damages of abjection. Understanding the complexities of disabled experiences of gender allows us to reconsider the socially constructed norms currently forced onto us. Then, instead of people being defined by an inability to meet non-disabled and gender expectations, society can be restructured to foster accessibility and acceptance.

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