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Hilary Pearson, M.Ed.
Doctoral Student, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto
hilary [dot] pearson [at] mail [dot] utoronto [dot] ca

Dramatizing Blindness: Disability Studies as Critical Creative Narrative is a reproduction of Devon Healey's (2019) PhD dissertation (originally titled, *Blindness in V Acts: Disability Studies as Critical Creative Inquiry*). *Dramatizing Blindness,* a phenomenal work in Blind Studies, has since been adopted into the *Literary Disability Studies* book series (LDS), a collection of "advanced scholarship exploring the ways in which the literary imagination intersects with historical and contemporary attitudes toward disability" (Healey, 2021, p. ii).

Dramatizing Blindness (Healey, 2021) challenges us (disabled and non-disabled people) to engage with further critical consideration regarding (i) how we "define the meaning of disability" (p. 18), (ii) how we live and relate to one another, and (iii) how we understand "what it is to be human" (p. 4). Healey's untethered imagination marries academic scholarship and theatrical arts in a comprehensive and engaging production of critical narrative inquiry. This autoethnographic work is structured as a five-act play complete with stage directions, scripted dialogue, set, sound and lighting design, chorus members, and "theoretical intermission[s]" (p. 23) wherein Healey theorizes each act through interpretive disability studies. Healey conceptualizes blindness in terms of "performativity" (p. 5) "choos[ing] theatre as the primary method of expressing [their] exploration of the phenomenon of blindness" (p. 167).

It’s a Sighted World

Dramatizing Blindness invites us to witness the ways in which contemporary Western culture beckons blindness “to learn and understand the world as sighted” (p. 92) within “various situations including medicine, education, the street, [and] the home” (p. 159). Each of the five (V) acts function as a way “to release blindness from the grasp of sight” (p. 159) thus, setting the stage for a critical conversation that reveals how our society tends to understand blindness and sight as separate, conflicting dichotomies. Each setting is accompanied by its own interpretation for blindness’ supposed appearance. *Act I: The Genesis of Blindness* introduces a dominant perception of blindness “as a medical problem” (p. 10) as situated in medical offices. *Act II: The School of Hard Knocks* shows blindness “understood as the absence of sight” (p. 94) as situated in academic arenas.

What I find intriguing is the way in which Healey identifies sight as the perception that seemingly “provides for the only reality [...] and assumes that all students are sighted, or should be” (p. 93). To assume that entire group of peoples (i.e., students) “are” a particular way (or “should be”) is an alarming “reality” (p. 93) that (sadly) “makes sense” (p. 95) (i.e., reflects cultural views accurately) and yet, simultaneously sounds nonsensical. How can we expect such homogeneous impossibilities and yet, still respond with shock and disbelief when faced with one another’s differences? Healey presents a wonderful, thought-provoking paradox that is perhaps not widely acknowledged or considered, and yet, *should be.*

Performing and Belonging

Act III unveils a “silent” (p. 130) concept about the sighted world that sighted people are seemingly *unable* to see for themselves, and yet, appears to have always been visible for blindness. Healey (2021, p. 117) introduces “Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical model” as a fascinating instrument for understanding the human being as a character engaged in “a series of performances” (Healey, 2021, p. 117). Healey explicates this concept through exploring the notion of *passing* (a branch of *performativity*) as a method for negotiating one’s way through the world unnoticed (i.e., to appear as though they belong). While navigating the streets of downtown Toronto (i.e., the subway, a crosswalk, a coffee shop), Erin (the protagonist) appears to habitually *perform* the character traits (movements and behaviours) “expected” (p. 10) of a sighted person, and thus, finds that she can “pass as sighted” (p. 108) in certain social settings, particularly when signifiers of blindness, such as a “white identification (ID) cane” (p. 132) are absent. In this way, blindness wears the mask of sight and thus appears to belong—camouflaged in plain sight amongst a sea of sighted people (who remain blissfully unaware in their effortless, passive performance) all of which *naturally* belong.

Healey makes an excellent point about how our culture perceives particular social ways of being in terms of *natural* and *unnatural.* To move with *ease* is a privilege that sighted people need not worry about, whereas blind people perhaps find that they “cannot ‘relax’ […] aware that they may be observed by anyone at any time” (p. 117). Therefore, as Healey poignantly observes, blindness must remain “‘in character’ at all times” (p. 117) *if* blindness is to appear as though it *naturally* belongs. As a sighted person, this chapter prompts my own critical analysis—an opportunity to reflect upon the ways in which I too take for granted that I live in a “sighted world” (p. 166). The world’s blueprint was not structured in such a way to accommodate blindness in any fashion. The world was structured to accommodate sight—a derivative of “normative expectations” of who and “what ought to be” (p. 107) present in shared social spaces. The ease with which sighted people move within the world reflects an inherent “sense of belonging" (p. 108) that is "taken for granted" (p. 112). The signifying feature that causes blindness to "stand out" (p. 109) is the *lack of ease* with which blindness navigates a sighted world. Healey utilizes the notion of "passing" (p. 108) to unearth the unseen cultural roots deeply embedded within our social behaviours, interactions, and anticipations. *Act III: Blindness in the Street* reveals yet another example of how we privilege and legitimize sight as the dominant way of experiencing life. Healey determinedly stresses that such roots were planted, watered, and honed by the hands of culture.

Act IV takes us into the home where Erin (the protagonist) and her blindness are no longer in the sightline of society's scrutiny, and therefore, no longer expected to *act* or *perform* as something other than itself. This chapter's significance shines through Healey's engagement with a difficult discussion in personhood and self-actualization—a discussion that all disabled folks face in one way or another. There is a moment of naked vulnerability wherein the protagonist "confess[es] that she does not know *how to be* blind" (p. 24). Healey depicts the complexities of reconciling the various pieces of the self beautifully in this act, showing us how *being* blind is vastly different from *becoming* or *acquiring* blindness.

This chapter brings us back to Healey's guiding questions, where we are invited to wonder about (i) the "relations between disabled and non-disabled people" (p. 21), (ii) how we fit and belong in a world where we wait indefinitely for a precarious, unknown something to appear, to change, to interrupt existing understandings of disability in relation to personal identity. As a scholar who acquired disability later in life, I found this act riveting in its way to evoke relatable emotion and critical self-reflection. Healey crafts an incredible space of friction for grappling with themes of acceptance and refusal—a space wherein one may attempt to reckon with the perceived fractured pieces of self as whole parts of the human being.

Voice

Healey expertly weaves the many voices of blindness, sight, and the chorus in *Act V: The Spectre of a Home* (a one act play) wherein Erin (the protagonist) navigates the theme of personal identity as she waits for blindness' arrival. This introspective act dives into a philosophical exploration of the self that further grapples with the complexities existing in-between acquired blindness and being blind. Healey creatively personifies the voices of blindness and sight as interactive characters whose dialogue reflects and challenges the ways in which contemporary society "privileges sight as the main and most legitimate interlocutor" (p. 25) leaving blindness to be interpreted as "sheer distortion" and "unintelligible" (p. 25). Healey's use of voice sets the stage for a "multi-layered and often confusing conversation" (p. 25) that the protagonist (Erin) must navigate.

The *chorus,* another "multi-layered and confusing voice" (p. 25) is an unexpected yet terribly effective cast of characters that appear to mirror the atmospheric ebb and flow of tension—thus, serve to embellish the theatrical tone. Together, with the voices of blindness and sight, the chorus shows us "that blindness comes in different shapes" (p. 160). *Act V* brings the abstract to life as blindness and sight become embodied characters that attempt to make sense of one another through lively (yet contemplative) existential discourse. These voices emerge with guns blazing as they fight to be heard, understood, and acknowledged.

Provocative Imagery

Amidst the entertaining chaos that fills this final act (i.e., the battle of the voices) Healey infuses a juxtaposing figure for the audience to consider before the final curtain. Healey's paints a perfectly painful portrayal of the protagonist, "*seated cross-legged centre stage alone, waiting*" (p. 158). I find myself rather transfixed by this moment in time as it leaves me in an incomplete sort of head space wherein, I aspire to know more. I find myself wondering about what happens next—whether Erin indeed finds what she is waiting for. I wonder if the solitary act of *waiting* ever ends for Erin or if Erin indeed finds herself waiting indefinitely, without any sense of certainty, for an uncapturable change that perhaps remains just out of reach. Healey creates an atmosphere of captivating mystery that invites us to engage further with the story unfolding for blindness and disability.

The solitary act in *waiting* exudes an element of unpredictability (an element that I find all too familiar as a member of the *acquired chronic condition club*). This moment may represent a shift in perception wherein the protagonist acknowledges that her future (as a blind woman) is perhaps unknowable, as Healey suggests, "[f]or whom or for what she is waiting becomes blurry" (p. 24). This chilling insight captures the essence of disability beautifully as a formless presence that haunts the spaces in which we (disabled people) occupy. Healey's imagery is poetic, sublime, yet eerily relatable, for we (disabled people) often find ourselves waiting for our life to make sense to ourselves and to those around us.

I find myself nodding along with this rather relatable story as I imagine myself seated somewhere similarly, waiting in my aloneness. Perhaps I, too, wait for something to happen. Just as Erin waits in a vacant theatre, others may find themselves waiting in the emergency room at a hospital… waiting to be seen by a doctor, waiting for test results, waiting for a diagnosis or a prognosis, waiting for news, waiting for acceptance, waiting for part of the self to appear or disappear. This chapter accurately reflects the confusion felt when trying to sort through and accept one's seemingly fluid and unfixed identity. Healey paints a deeply moving picture for her readers—a picture that mirrors the powerful emotions that perhaps we (disabled people) have yet to place, name, or acknowledge. Through skillful storytelling techniques, Healey encourages us to consider how we perceive the human experience and how we understand its relation to disability.

The isolated figure awakens a sense of *déjà vu*—particularly for those with lived experience in acquired chronic health conditions and disabilities—wherein we appear to be trapped in a sublime waiting room. Healey guides us through the anguish of waiting within this liminal space, emphasizing that the fear of the unknown is a common feature of the disability experience. This relatable notion of "solitary waiting" (in relation to disability) ironically reminds us that we are all together in our aloneness (a sentiment in which I personally draw comfort) as we wait (with Erin) for disability to appear, disappear, reappear, to change, to transform. The uncanny ability to paint a lasting impression is an undeniably effective feature of Healey's approach to storytelling—one that incites further discussion and meaning making—from a disability studies perspective.

Perception

What Healey has achieved in constructing this artistic ensemble is much more than a theoretical analysis of the lived experience of a blind woman navigating the streets of downtown Toronto. Dramatizing the disability experience is a difficult, daunting task on a good day. To mold the experience in a palatable, comprehensive format allows the audience to glimpse the inner workings of our cultural and social structures in such a way that shows us (rather than tells us) how these operations impact our lives (both disabled and nondisabled alike). Healey's performative pedagogy makes it possible for the audience to make connections reflexively, leaving us to reach our own conclusions that are unlikely to be soon forgotten.

Healey explains that blindness has much to teach us about perception and "may reveal a new understanding of the world" (p. 168) for us to consider:

> The specific character of blindness can teach disability studies something more than human rights, disability rights, the need for inclusion, and the like. It can teach all of us [...] that what blindness perceives may reveal a new understanding of the world. This is the way, I believe, this work influences disability studies and also may pave the way for the advent of Blind Studies. This remains "to be seen." (p. 168)

Dramatizing Blindness is a unique translation of academia and theatre that invites us to engage with the "multi-layered and confusing voice[s]" (p. 25) that we encounter "in everyday life" (p. 8). Healey expertly highlights "the importance of the lived experience" (p. 61). In this way, Healey's poetic pedagogical approach presents a story of blindness that bleeds authenticity—a striking feature that dramatically sets this work apart from any other in its field. Healey seamlessly translates the lived experience across each of the five (V) acts and helpfully concludes each act with a theoretical intermission wherein Healey provides a comprehensive analysis for meaningful interpretation. The theoretical intermission creates space for reflexive analysis wherein the audience might take a moment, catch their breath, and reflect upon the cultural significance embedded within this multi-layered performance. I highly recommend this artistic masterpiece to any student, scholar, or novice who holds even a spark of interest in the field of disability studies. *Dramatizing Blindness* has revolutionized what it means to write a dissertation—a sentiment that brings hope, excitement, and boundless potential for future works to be imagined, and considered, for the *Literary Disability Studies* book series.

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