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Activists in Disability Studies regularly warn the non-disabled about inspiration porn narratives constructed by ableist media around people who ‘overcome’ disability, who integrate in such a way that their only push back against the hostility of the world is being more abled than disabled. Charles Hughes’ new book *Why Bushwick Bill Matters*, from the University of Texas Press, argues against these narratives in a way that complicates problems of how to be disabled now. In this book, he wrestles with the problem of how to acknowledge that a disabled figure can provide an example of how to live, how to be disabled in public, and also have that figure be difficult, thorny, or problematic.

Bushwick Bill was born in Jamaica, and grew up in the predominantly African American neighbourhood, Five Points, in Houston. He began as a hype man, the hip hop equivalent of a barker, and then joined the Geto Boys. The work that the Boys produced was often a burlesque of sexuality and gender; politically incendiary, and sometimes deeply offensive. In fact, it was so offensive, that it would result in government censure when the American congress held hearings about obscenity in music, during the late 1980s. Bill would follow up with a solo career, which combined astute critiques against the state, misogynist violence, and lacerating self-portrayals. Much of Bill’s career after the Geto Boys was marked by profound depression, addiction, and violence--including a self-inflicted gunshot wound which would blind him in one eye.

Bill was not a stable figure, in his personal life, but also in the performance and rhetoric of his larger work. Placing his practice into context is to work out what authorship means--the differences between personae and personhood; between work that is outrageous on purpose and a personal life which violates consent. How do you write about the horror of a life, when the person whose life is being discussed purposefully exaggerates their own horrors? How much of this was self-defence , considering Bill was born short enough to be considered disabled as well as being mad?

Charles Hughes (who is a close friend), who has written brilliantly about race and country music, as well as the intersection of soul and country music, both for academic and populist audiences, is uniquely positioned to write about Bill as a difficult figure. Hughes himself is as short as Bill was. Though he grew up white in Wisconsin, he writes about how seeing Bill, and having Bill sing about being short with anger, was liberating. It's not only that representation matters, it is the full range of representations--to push against the offensive stereotypes of shortness, the bad jokes, the invasive questions; not with politeness, or a quiet prosperity, but with a burn-it-all-down energy. Bill's radicality allows for another way to look at disabled people.

Hughes' work on country music and race is of course relevant here, but even more so combined with the fact of their similar stature--both of them used to being stared at, and both made victims of public performance, whether consensual to or not. On occasion, short people who have been the subject of a non-consensual gaze might reclaim it, make the private indignity a public performance. The problem of deliberate performance is one that Hughes considers carefully. He begins by quoting Joseph Strauss: "the disabled performer has a dual task: to perform music and to perform disability." The book then becomes both a biography of Bill, and

an argument about how to perform disability in public -- how to work a middle ground between those two kinds of performances.

As well as being an established historian of working-class spectacle – the work on country music, and upcoming work on African American wrestling – Hughes knows the history of this kind of performance, including its toxic origin in the freak show, the carnival, and the circus. Being a disabled performer, one always pushes against this history of performance being written on the bodies of performers against their will. One way of resisting that history is through Bill’s self-constructed grotesqueries: “As a prominent disabled performer whose shortness became central to his work, Bushwick Bill reflected and remixed a longer, more ambivalent tradition. When he stepped up to the mic, Bill didn’t just add a crucial new voice to the rap conversation. He bum-rushed the freak show” (28).

It is not only the size of Bill which marks him as disabled. Writing of the Bushwick track “Mind of a Lunatic,” Hughes notes the violence, how offensive it could be, and how much of that violence is against women. (Hughes also notes that Bill is a significant critic of violence, producing anti-war texts which argue that George Bush’s violence was not rhetorical, performed outside of his usual personae, as Bill’s was.)

Garland-Thomson (1997) talks about the way “bodies that are disabled can also seem dangerous because they are perceived as out of control...they violate physical norms... they threaten to disrupt the ritualized behavior upon which social relations turn” (37). Hughes suggests that, channeling this pressure, Bill sometimes turned himself into a monster. Bill’s refusal of social relations is central to understanding his work. In a chapter on the history of his relationship with violence, Hughes’ discusses how Bill played at being Chuckie, the monstrous clown from the self-aware horror movie *Child’s Play*. There are layers in Bill’s performance of

Chuckie--of how a grown man becomes a child, but a child who is capable of adult crimes; on acts of meta-clowning, on burlesquing that which is already a burlesque, and endlessly being in on the joke. Bill's intertextuality, his conceptual power, is respected by Hughes, who makes an argument for it not only as a musical context, but as a way of being disabled.

This complexity enters Bill's life. There are moments where he committed violence against himself and his loved ones that cannot be explained using excuses of rhetoric and personae. There is also a cryptic, late gospel turn, where through several late solo records, he seeks forgiveness for his past acts. There are tracks filled with homophobia and misogyny that cannot be explained away.

Hughes does not make an argument in favour of Bill as a figure of moral good. He does not argue that Bushwick's being disabled and mad is a reason to validate him. Why Bill matters for Hughes, is the depth and complexity of his life--and the gap between the performer and the performed. This small, well-considered, deeply felt, and often very funny volume is invaluable in the continued discourse of difficult people making difficult work, which seems necessary for the continued, spiky, and difficult possibility of disabled selfhood and expression.

References

Garland-Thomson, R. (1997) *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*. Columbia University Press.