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# The Professional Disabled Dancer and the Crippling of Western Concert Dance

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Professor Mintz

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Fig. 1. *Michigan Quarterly Review*, Edice Jurcys, [https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/mqrimage/x-98313-und-02/98313\\_02?chaperone=S-MQRIMAGE-X-98313-UND-02+98313\\_02;evl=full-image;quality=1;size=50;subview=download;view=entry](https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/mqrimage/x-98313-und-02/98313_02?chaperone=S-MQRIMAGE-X-98313-UND-02+98313_02;evl=full-image;quality=1;size=50;subview=download;view=entry).

Lights come up to reveal a creature with wheels on center stage. The space is only lit well enough to see the outline of a pair of wheelchairs configured to conceal the bodies of a pair of dancers. The creature shifts forward in short, stuttered rolls that eventually reveal the legs of one dancer and the torso of the other. Then, one dancer quickly takes both chairs for himself, carrying them on his shoulders as he walks through the space. This seamless, locomotive movement is opposed by the stillness of the other dancer, who was left on the ground without the support from his wheelchair. The walking dancer is stopped by the voice of the dancer lying

down. “I need a wheelchair,” he says. We learn the names of these two characters during their short conversation, Brian and Henry. Brian seems to be an able-bodied dancer, while Henry seems to be a disabled dancer. The contractures in his thin legs and hands and altered speech pattern distinguishes him from the performers we typically see on concert dance stages, from performers like Brian. This portion of their conversation culminates with Brian returning to Henry and fulfilling his initial request by giving him a wheelchair. Brian first sits in the other chair before assisting Henry from the ground into a seated position in the wheelchair.

After only a breath of stillness with the two dancers seated, Brian abandons his chair for Henry’s. The pair becomes intertwined with the single chair. Limbs weave in and emerge out of different available openings in the wheelchair, an image that harkens back to the unified chair-human form with which the piece began. The distinct forms, two dancers and one wheelchair, return as the bodies finish their twisting motions. Brian, seated in the chair, turns the wheels with his hands while Henry, kneeling behind the wheelchair, progresses forward as he shuffles along on his knees. Initiated by a frontal shift in his pelvis, Brian leans far enough back so that he slides off the chair and melts into the floor. Henry does the same, releasing his grip on the handles of the chair and falling backwards to the floor. The two come together, clutching each other for support, as they stand and trek towards the upstage left corner of the stage with Brian walking backwards and Henry walking forwards. After completing this diagonal progression, they release their grip on one another and, again, collapse into the floor with a more broken quality. In this moment, their bodies become fragmented parts as they break down piece by piece into the ground.

The dance then becomes a call-and-response, with Brian performing various rolls and floor movements followed by Henry repeating them after. They remain as individuals in their

spatial relationship on the stage and in their quality of movement. Their distinct bodies require different approaches in executing the same choreography. The call-and-response structure places their differences in close temporal proximity and allows for, perhaps even encourages, a comparison of their individual performances. Motions on the floor eventually bring the pair back together. Brian lifts Henry to standing and the two engage in some partnering. Holding on to one another at the wrists, they lean back and away from their partner. Their bodies show a deep feeling of being grounded into the floor as the dancers trust the other to hold and support their weight. Hesitancy is nonexistent as they shift points of contact calmly. The two move into a different kind of partnering, more weight-bearing, when Brian takes Henry onto his back. He moves Henry while in a strong position for his own body: standing. This section closes with Brian placing Henry in one of the wheelchairs. Now, Henry takes control by moving Brian into his lap and then manipulating Brian's body while at his most stable position: seated.

Throughout the remainder of the piece, shifts between partnering and the call-and-response movements explored at the beginning of the dance continue. The power dynamics between Brian and Henry fluctuate evenly, as each is cast as leader and follower whether they are moving as connected bodies or separate ones. This equality suggests that neither one of these dancers is superior to the other, despite the differences in their bodily appearance and the ways in which their bodies are capable of moving. Pieces like this one, titled "Wheels of Fortune," are rare in the current dance world.<sup>1</sup> Choreographer Alito Alessi and his Oregon-based dance company Joint Forces Dance are interested in presenting styles of Western concert dance forms, particularly working with modern techniques and contact improvisation methods, on both typical

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<sup>1</sup> Copied is the link to view "Wheel of Fortune," a duet choreographed by Alito Alessi for himself and Joint Forces Dance company member Emery Blackwell [https://search-alexanderstreet-com.lib-proxy01.skidmore.edu/view/work/bibliographic\\_entity%7Cvideo\\_work%7C3161002](https://search-alexanderstreet-com.lib-proxy01.skidmore.edu/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cvideo_work%7C3161002) (00:00-13:55).

and atypical dancing bodies. Alessi displays his interest in working with nondisabled and disabled bodies in “Wheels of Fortune,” with “Brian” danced by Alessi himself and “Henry” danced by Emery Blackwell, an accomplished dancer with cerebral palsy.

Dance is an insular art form, selective and exclusive in the cast of characters it allows on stages. This lack of accessibility can seem odd when considering the required materials for dancing: a body. All humans have access to a corporeal form, yet dance is not inclusive of all bodies. The traditional image of the dancing body and its movements make dance suitable for a limited range of body types. Despite modern, postmodern, and contemporary dance forms expanding the defining features of the ideal dancing body, the desired corporeal aesthetic remains intensely tied to the able body. Disabled persons combat these standards as they enter the dance world as both performers and choreographers. As they work and create in a space that did not, and does not, have them in mind, they misfit with their environment. However, this marginalized group, those identifying as disabled, step onto the stage, move beautifully, and capture the audience's attention and interest. Disabled dancers force a reconsideration of the aesthetic demands of both dancing bodies and dance movements themselves as they subvert the norms of Western concert.

Conventionally, dance is for the normative body, one that is bipedal, independently ambulatory, and healthy. There is no space for “ugliness,” as the bodies that train and perform in dance are expected, often demanded, to be beautiful. Traditionally, physical beauty in the realm of dance is idealized as a long, extremely thin, symmetrical body with a delicate grace and hidden muscular strength. The fascination with this body type blossomed in twentieth-century ballet with George Balanchine, a Russian-born dancer who came to America and co-founded the

New York City Ballet. Balanchine was interested in extending the classical lines of ballet, making the quintessential shapes longer, narrower, and higher. An example of this is the standard he established for the arabesque, which is still revered today. An arabesque requires a dancer to stand on one leg while lifting the other behind them. Both legs remain straight and turned out; the foot of the lifted leg is intensely pointed. The relationship between the arms mirrors that of the legs, with one extended in front of the dancer, fingers aligned with nose, and the other placed gently to the side. The proper arabesque height for the Romantic ballets that preceded Balanchine created an angle of about sixty degrees between the two legs. In contrast, Balanchine desired an angle of ninety degrees or greater between the legs. The flexibility and elongation of the body required for this arabesque were, and are, mandated in all aspects of ballet technique. To achieve this aesthetic, Balanchine insisted on his dancers being thin, usually unhealthily so and sometimes to the point of starvation. This physical appearance, as well as his training style and choreography, remain relevant to current ballet pedagogy (Kiem, HuffPost). Moreover, the admiration for the Balanchine body in dance permeates the styles of modern, postmodern, and contemporary. Though these forms are more inclusive of a variety of body types than ballet, able bodies of symmetry, length, and leanness continue to be praised above others.

These expectations of proper dancing bodies are reinforced by the Western concert dance techniques themselves. As described by Owen Smith, “that which lay outside the frame of the sanctioned form would not be considered as ‘art.’ In the art of dance, we can see the privileging of technical form, delivered in ways only accessible to bodies that reflect a particular corporeal ideal” (Smith, 78). Because these movements, both of the ballet and modern vernaculars, were created on able bodies, specifically a certain kind of able body, the dancing inherently limits

other types of bodies' access to the forms. It is a reciprocated relationship between body and movement, as the desire for a beautiful, able body reinforces the types of dance movements performed and the popular concert dance vocabulary revolves around an idealized, often unattainable, corporeal being.

An illusion of effortlessness is consistently required in the execution of dance steps despite the level of difficulty or physical demand. This attribute dates back to the beginnings of Western concert dance in French ballrooms during the reign of Louis XIV in the seventeenth-century. Dancing bodies completed specified steps in order to move through the spacious ballrooms in intricately designed geometric patterns. These steps are most closely related to familiar social dance forms like the minuet. While the rapid articulation of the feet in the small skips proved challenging, the upper body needed to maintain a calm comportment. The belief that the quality of the body reflected the quality of the character reinforced the placed carriage of the upper body. Proper physical poise was associated with stable moral character. Thus, in order to maintain noble status, dancers had to conceal the effort required to perform their dancing perfectly. This ideal dancing demeanor was described in the writings of Baldassare Castiglione, a renowned seventeenth-century dancing master whose *Book of the Courtier* was a required text for dancing nobility of the time. Castiglione advised, "practice in all things a certain nonchalance which conceals all artistry and makes whatever one says or does seem uncontrived and effortless" (Montero, 2). While the steps of Louis XIV's court transformed drastically over hundreds of years into the classical ballet technique we are familiar with today, effortlessness has persisted as an essential quality. For instance, imagine the ethereality of the "Little Swans" in *Swan Lake*. The four dancers connect to one another by interlacing their arms as they execute precise and quick footwork that mirrors the staccato portion of the musical score and harkens

back to the hops of Louis XIV's court dances. Despite the demand of the legs and feet, their upper bodies remain quiet. The "Little Swans" embody their characters, gliding across the stage as if they are actual swans floating seamlessly along a lake.

Shifting from ballet to modern and postmodern dance styles, effortlessness is still admired but not defined in the exact same manner. Modern/postmodern innovators were comfortable with their dancers exhibiting signs of exertion, such as heavy breathing and obvious sweating. However, showing the hard work of performing this choreography does not diminish the power or clarity of the movement. The concealment of effort in these dance forms is instead defined by an efficiency of movement. Barbara Gail Montero, in her essay on "Aesthetic Effortlessness," denotes a key distinction in understanding the effortlessness in these efficient modern/postmodern motions. She says, "Efficient bodily movements in dance, then, cannot be understood as moving with the minimum number of motions or in the most direct way possible from one point to another. Rather, in this context, it seems that an efficient movement is one that involves no superfluous muscle tension" (Montero, 9). An example of this form of effortlessness is the codified technique of Martha Graham, one of the mothers of modern dance. Her movement is highly physicalized, with a focus on all motions being initiated from the core of the body, specifically the solar plexus. In having a particular part of the body as a catalyst for all dancing, there is a clear succession of specific muscles activated in order to set the dancer into motion. Modern/postmodern dance styles attempt to only attend to necessary muscular effort, which maintains the physical ease, the appearance of effortlessness, desired in almost all of Western concert dance forms, past and present.

The emphasis on the visual appearance of dancing bodies and their movements stems from the fact that dance is a performing art, one that is presented to an audience for viewing.



Despite the physical distance between the performer and the audience as established by the spatial paradigm of the proscenium theater, a connection between the two groups in the space is created. Both groups acknowledge the human forms positioned opposite themselves. This relationship between performer and audience was heightened by the postmodern shift in attention to actual fleshy bodies instead of on the image of dancing bodies; an interest in three-dimensional people moving through space as opposed to two-dimensional characters arranged in contained positions. The postmodern interest in real bodies added a level of humanness to dancers and their dancing that had not been seen before. Dance became concerned with pushing the human body to physical extremes through effortful, yet efficient, movements. As described by performance artist Jill Sigman, “There is something very special about the experience of seeing another body, live, moving in space. There is a way we are affected by that moving body; we feel resonance. It’s a kind of visceral experience” (4). When watching other humans move, especially when they are not masking aspects of their physical exertions, the audience is reminded of their own bodily conditions, of their own humanity. Bodies in live performance foster an environment in which all persons, both performer and audience member, are reminded of their shared experience in their related corporeal forms.

When disability appears in the dance world, it often comes in the form of visible disabilities. The bodies of this population of dancers do not attain the beauty standards defined by dance and cultural norms. Most basically, disabled dancers often do not have the highly desired bodily feature of symmetry. Moreover, because their bodies differ from the expectation, the ballet and modern dance movements themselves are not suited for their bodies. This creates a kind of friction between disabled dancers and the ableist dance environment that we might call

“misfitting,” a term Rosemary Garland-Thompson uses to describe the general and frequent conflict between disabled bodies and their surroundings. In “Misfits: a Feminist Materialist Disability Concept,” Garland-Thompson outlines that “A misfit...describes an incongruent relationship between two things: a square peg and a round hole. The problem with a misfit, then, inheres not in either of the two things but rather in their juxtaposition, the awkward attempt to fit them together. When the spatial and temporal context shifts, so does the fit” (592-593). The act of misfitting is a relational circumstance that is dependent on the interactions between the body and the space around it. A misfit may not be able to enter certain spaces, move or sense their surroundings, or simply be comfortable or confident in a setting. Environments tend to cater to the normative majority, not the individual minority, which leads to these moments of misfitting.

Dancers like Emery Blackwell experience misfitting. His cerebral palsy limits his bipedal movement, making him unable to execute balletic, or even modern, dance movements in the expected manner, since Blackwell requires physical support from a partner or from a device like a wheelchair. Moreover, Blackwell has severe contractures in all of his extremities, a tightening and thus shortening of muscles and tendons that cause stiffness in joints. These contractures curve his limbs into themselves, preventing Blackwell from extending his body through space, a key attribute in the shaping and lines of the body in both ballet and modern dance. But, despite his asymmetrical body with limited mobility, Blackwell is a talented dancer. As proved in his performance in Alessi’s “Wheels of Fortune,” he finds his own way to execute the modern-style floorwork in unison with his partner. Blackwell creates a movement aesthetic unique to his body that crimps normative dancing as he proves that he can perform well in the environment with which he is supposed to misfit. He works with a one-of-a-kind corporeal medium. The legitimacy of his artistry and performance presents his body as a valid dancing

form. While disabled dancers may not be considered beautiful by the standards of Western concert dance, their presence, and excellence, makes space for an alternative image and definition of dancing bodies to be considered as a valuable form as well.

As a dancer with cerebral palsy, Blackwell is just one example of people with physical disabilities performing in concert dance. AXIS Dance Company is a physically-integrated modern dance company based in Oakland, CA whose dancers are both disabled and nondisabled. All of the disabled dancers in the current company have Spinal Cord Injuries (SCI). In fact, AXIS is currently seeking apprentices, unpaid dancers who work with the company as a trial-run before getting hired full-time for their company. Their search announcement reads, “Are you a physical person with a Spinal Cord Injury (SCI) who has a passion for movement, dance and exploration and would relish in the opportunity to dance and train with America’s leading physically integrated dance company? Then AXIS is looking for you” (Hannah Rogge, Facebook). The disabled dancers in this company, unlike Blackwell, experienced some sort of trauma in their lifetime that shifted their status from abled to disabled; they acquired their physical disability. AXIS selects for a certain kind of disabled body, one with a specific diagnosis and a specific appearance. This appearance often ties the disabled body to an outside device, such as a wheelchair, crutches, or cane, for support in their movements. While AXIS’s selectiveness can appear as negative and exclusive at first, as it counters their initiatives surrounding the accessibility of dance for all kinds of bodies, the specificity of AXIS’s audition notice is in keeping with those of other dance companies that work with only able-bodied dancers. Since dance is concerned with aesthetics, a beautifully symmetrical and able form, it is common for companies to seek dancers of a certain gender, height, size, or race and that information is often delineated in a casting call. Thus, when AXIS’s audition notice indicates

their interest in hiring apprentices with SCIs in particular, they are asserting themselves to be of the same caliber, the same selectivity, as other modern/contemporary dance companies.

The desire for evaluation equivalent to their able-bodied, normative counterparts is pervasive among physically integrated dance companies. After an interview with Judy Smith, the former artistic director of AXIS, dance writer Rita Feliciano consolidates Smith's commentary on wanting to be more than just a company about disability. Feliciano summarizes that "As political activists, they challenge notions of normalcy and champion social inclusiveness. As artists, they want to be seen and evaluated as dancers first and foremost" (59). When disabled company members are not expected to be able to execute the beautiful movements originally crafted for able bodies, audiences may praise performances of any caliber. Moreover, they may applaud simply for the disabled dancers' presence on stage, out of surprise at their confidence or fear of their presence. In turn, disabled dancers are forced to prove they are capable of performing at the same quality level as their able-bodied peers as they find modifications of dance movements inclusive of more kinds of corporeal forms.

Some disabled dancers prove their skill by performing able-bodied dancing through a kind of passing. While the notion of passing, assuming the identity of another in pursuit of increasing one's social status, is often discussed in the context of race, it also occurs in disability. Scholar Tony Siebers discusses passing and disability in his essay "Disability as Masquerade," writing that "Passing is possible not only because people have sufficient genius to disguise their identity but also because society has a general tendency to repress the embodiment of difference" (3). Since our society deems otherness as unwanted, it is readily overlooked or ignored. When an individual masks their difference, or passes as normal, it is accepted as truth. In the case of dance, disabled dancers sometimes pass for able-bodied dancers to elevate their status and to be

judged as a normal dancing body, and the audience accepts them as such. While passing in the context of disability more frequently and easily occurs with invisible disabilities, such as those related to mental health, pain, or fatigue, it can also happen with physical disabilities that manifest more subtly in the body, like in that of Jerrod Herman, another professional dancer with cerebral palsy.

Herman is a member of Heidi Latsky Dance, a New York-based contemporary dance company whose mission is to “redefine beauty and virtuosity through performance and discourse, employing performers with unique attributes to bring rigorous, passionate, and provocative contemporary dance to diverse audiences” ([heidilatskydance.org](http://heidilatskydance.org)). The “redefin[ing]” Heidi Latsky attempts through her choreography is analogous to disabled dancers crippling concert dance norms. Herman is one of Latsky’s dancers with a “unique attribute.” His body goes against the symmetrical standard for normative dance; his particular diagnosis of cerebral palsy affects only the left side of his body. Despite this, Herman often passes as able-bodied when performing because of his understanding of his personal physicality in the context of Latsky’s choreography.

A short video interview documents Herman’s daily routine, incorporating moments in both his home and in the studio. Inside his home, Herman prepares a meal. The added effort it takes him to complete the task is clear because only his right arm is available for use. In contrast, Herman conceals the asymmetry of his body when he dances. This is not because he suddenly extends his left side in spite of his contractures, but because Herman understands the normative standards of concert dance and displays his body in a way that lets him pass as “normal.” In this interview, Herman comments “as I’ve been told, my arabesque is crazy. But, it comes from my left side, my left leg shooting up to the air and my balance is based on the right

side, being the impetus for control” (Herman, [cerebralpalsyguidance.com](http://cerebralpalsyguidance.com)). To execute this iconic ballet position, Herman stands on a single leg, stable and grounded into the floor, as the other lifts behind him. Both legs are straight and Herman arches through his left ankle to give the illusion of a fully pointed foot. Prescribed by the ideal arabesque as defined by Balanchine, his arms mirror the positioning of the legs. Herman’s right arm reaches out gracefully in front of him while he rests the left arm against his torso. Herman’s passing as able-bodied appears in much of his dancing, not just when performing his “crazy” arabesque. His passing is not a dismissal of his disability. Rather, it proves to the audience that normative concert dance can be performed by non-normative bodies. In passing, Herman negates the notion that asymmetrical, disabled bodies are not fit for concert dance.

Siebers also defines a variation of passing he refers to as masquerading, the assumption of a marginalized identity group as a mode of empowerment. Siebers writes, “the more visible the disability, the greater the chance that the disabled person will be repressed from public view and forgotten. The masquerade shows that disability exists at the same time that it, as masquerade, does not exist” (6). By unapologetically embodying, and perhaps even emphasizing or exaggerating, one’s disability, the individual has the authority to dictate the presentation of their differences while also highlighting that their marker is a performance, a social construction. Blackwell’s performance in “Wheel of Fortune” is a moment of masquerading, as he does not hide his different way of dancing. Rather, Blackwell highlights his difference in the choreography performed in unison with the normative dancing body and movement of his partner, Alessi. When watching the pair, there are clear moments of unison, particularly when they dance together on the floor. Both bodies are choreographed in the same way with rolls and crawls shifting in the same directions at the same tempo. Alessi completes them smoothly,

melting in and out of the floor seamlessly, while Blackwell's more angular form limits fluidity in his motions and he breaks in and out of the floor. Though Blackwell's motions are more fragmented than Alessi's, both dancers maintain the illusion of effortlessness as prescribed by concert dance standards; Alessi in the traditional sense with effortlessness as complete ease and Blackwell in the contemporary sense with effortlessness as efficiency of muscular exertion. Blackwell does not hide his differently-abled body, he embraces it in this instance of masquerading and ultimately cripes the notion that effortless dancing is limited to able-bodied dancers.

Many of the dances in AXIS's repertory incorporate masquerading as well, like "Divide," a piece choreographed by the current artistic director of the company Marc Brew.<sup>2</sup> A section of "Divide" is a trio with two able-bodied dancers, Sonsheree Giles and Sebastian Grubb, and one disabled dancer who uses a wheelchair, Joel Brown. Brew begins with Brown between Giles and Grubb, emphasizing Brown's difference by placing him in close proximity to bodies that adhere to normative dance beauty standards while Brown does not. When the trio section begins, Grubb abandons the others through a series of small jumps downstage. Simultaneously, Giles and Brown move in parallel with one another in their own circular paths, creating a row of overlapping Venn diagrams on the stage if their pathways were painted on the ground while they executed them. At times, it seems as though Giles has to push herself, exert effort, to maintain the pace Brown has in his wheelchair. After moving him downstage, Grubb's frolicking hops and skips return him to his fellow dancers. The trio completes a large section of unison movement. Or, rather, as unified as it can be with a disabled dancer who uses a wheelchair on

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<sup>2</sup> Here is access to the section of Brew's "Divide" described above:  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cwKEt8Q3\\_tQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cwKEt8Q3_tQ).

the stage. Brown does not remain stationary and simply complete the upper body motions of Giles and Grubb; he locomotes through space right next to them, completing the diagonal running/rolling passes across the stage. When Giles and Grubb shift towards the floor, completing inversions in which they place their hands on the floor to lift their legs in the air, Brown does the same. He leans forward in his chair, tilting in a way that mirrors the positions of his partners. Brown maintains an ease in his upper body, never tensing, as he takes hold of his wheels to move himself through space effortlessly.

Brown, similar to Blackwell in “Wheel of Fortune,” embodies his difference in his dancing as a kind of masquerade. However, Brown remaining seated throughout “Divide” is a more dramatic example of masquerading; unlike Blackwell, he maintains the association between his body and a device that immediately identifies him as disabled: his wheelchair. Brew, the choreographer of “Divide,” is a disabled dancer himself. After a SCI from a car accident that paralyzed him from the sternum down, he uses a wheelchair to perform pedestrian and dance movements. Brew’s personal circumstances allowed him to create choreography for Brown in an empathetic way. Since Brew experiences the possibilities of dancing in a wheelchair for himself, he creates nuanced movements for Brown when in near unison with his able-bodied counterparts. The essence and integrity of Brew’s choreography for Giles and Grubb is present in the modifications made for Brown’s unique form, too. Brown emphasizes his disability while still performing effortlessly and efficiently in this instance of masquerading. Like Blackwell, Brown demonstrates that his dancing may differ from the norm, but it is still beautiful.

A common feature of these performances, whether they include moments of passing or masquerading, is that they are live performances, meaning that they create a relationship between



the performer and the audience. The dancers, both able-bodied and disabled, force their viewers to watch them, to look at them. More generally, there are two ways in which people tend to approach disability visually. First, there is the reaction of averting one's eyes, not wanting to confront a dissimilar body that holds many unknowns. In contrast, there can also be an urge to stare. Garland-Thompson describes this staring at disabled bodies, at different bodies, as "an urgent effort to explain the unexpected, to make sense of the unanticipated and inexplicable visual experience" (30). This kind of gawking at persons with disabilities has been a part of the paradigm between disabled and nondisabled for hundreds of years, as indicated by Michael de Montaigne's essay "Of a monstrous child." Published in 1580, it tells the story of a family that paraded their conjoined twins around like circus animals for money (Montaigne, 1). Curiosity and fear seem to initiate stares at disabled bodies. There is a desire to investigate what is other, but concern surrounding what further inquiry will reveal. In this relationship between the gazer, the able body, and the gazed upon, the disabled body, the gazer has control of the situation. They are the observer making judgments about the observed.

In presenting their bodies in performance, disabled dancers reclaim control over how their audience stares at them. They choreograph the experience of the onlookers as they portray themselves in their own manner, whether that be almost passing as able-bodied like Herman or masquerading and emphasizing difference like Blackwell or Brown. Garland-Thompson presents three disabled female performance artists in her chapter "Dares to Stares: Disabled Women Performance Artists & the Dynamics of Staring." Each of these performers considers the audience's staring as a part of the choreography of their performance and they use their agency as performers to reclaim power over how their viewers experience and understand their disability. One of these performers is Carrie Sandahl, a disability studies scholar and

performance artist who exposes her body and highlights her disability in her productions.

Garland-Thompson notes that “Sandahl’s performance allows her to engage the stares by confronting her starers with her own knowledge of what they think they know about her body, reversing the assumption that nondisabled people know something about people with disabilities by staring at them” (39). When approaching a person with a disability, able-bodied people have the tendency to assume they can figure out the truths about the disabled individual through staring alone; they do not need, or want, to interact with the person themselves. Sandahl works with this trope to reveal to her audience that they cannot fully understand her body through their gawking, but that they need to consider the authority Sandahl has over her own corporeal form in order to see the fullness of her different body.

Garland-Thompson uses performance artists, not dancers, to support her discussion of staring in disabled performance. However, there are dance works that address reclaiming power in the stare. For example, Latsky of Heidi Latsky Dance’s work called “On Display” addresses the issue of staring directly (see fig. 2).



Fig. 2. “Disability ‘On Display’ at the UN: a dance project by Heidi Latsky.” Youtube, 5 December 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6P5ellY90OI>.

“‘On Display’ is a deconstructed art exhibit/fashion show and commentary on the body as spectacle and society’s obsession with body image. It turns a cast of diverse and extreme bodies into a sculpture court where the performers are the sculptures” (heidilatskydance.org). These “diverse and extreme bodies” include those with disabilities. Beginning as a single site specific performance, Latsky’s “On Display” has expanded into a global project.<sup>3</sup> Sites around the world create their own sculpture courts and submit videos of their performances to Heidi Latsky Dance to be incorporated into a cumulative film to be presented on National Day for Persons with Disabilities.<sup>4</sup> The sculpture court is an example of structured improvisation, meaning that the piece is not explicitly choreographed. Rather, Latsky has created an improvisation score, a set of movement rules for performers to follow during the duration of the piece. The “On Display” sculpture court’s score is as follows: performers enter the public, non-proscenium space and strike a large, sculptural pose they feel they can maintain for an extended period of time. While they hold this position, completely still, their eyes are open, gazing out with a soft focus. When they feel as though they can no longer remain still, the performers have the option to shift into another shape at an extremely slow tempo, slow enough that an onlooker might not even notice their transformation. If the performer chooses to move, they must do so with their eyes closed. They reopen their eyes when they finish moving. Audience members are encouraged to walk through the sculpture court, and to observe and look at the “On Display” performers as if they were in an art museum. In “On Display” and its associated projects, Latsky addresses that

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<sup>3</sup> A site specific performance is one that does not occur on the traditional proscenium concert stage. They often occur in public locations where there is the potential for the audience and for members of the public who are not involved in the performance as performer or audience member to interact with the performance piece in a more intimate way.

<sup>4</sup> Here is the link to access the cumulative "On Display Global" films from recent years:  
<http://www.heidilatsky.org/odg/>.

reverting the gaze is integral to disability culture. In this installation, the performers have the power to choose what they do or do not reveal, giving them control over a personal journey that cannot help but be affected by an audience. The tenuous and complex relationship between viewer and viewed that exists in performative work also permeates in everyday life with people who are different in some physical way and hence draws attention to themselves whether they want to or not (Latsky, “On Display” Signage).

With complete control over their bodies and experiences in “On Display” performances, dancers can present themselves and, more importantly, their bodies, however they choose to do so.<sup>5</sup>

Audience members then gaze upon bodies defined by and for themselves, not by the judgements and assumptions of an able-bodied onlooker.

There is a sense of assurance instilled in the body during this performance, whether or not the “On Display” performer is disabled or able-bodied. A testimonial from an “On Display” participant addresses this corporeal confidence. She writes,

When I dance I feel pleasure, a sense of vitality, connection, and grace. That is the private reality of my dancing. The public reality is that I am almost 70, and my physical presence, my aging flesh, makes some people uncomfortable. I used to feel apologetic about that. At times I looked in the studio mirrors while dancing and thought about how much my aging face detracted from my dancing. I fantasized putting a bag over my head. With my face hidden only my dancing would matter. Being in “On Display” has opened the possibility that being exactly who I am is not only acceptable but powerful. I can communicate my inner reality through my body. I too can create beauty and meaning

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<sup>5</sup> Through a recent connection with Heidi Latsky, I was able to organize an informal “On Display” exploration at Skidmore College with a group of students in the Dance Department. While there were no participants with disabilities because of the population at Skidmore, the individuals all indicated an experience of agency over their bodies, one of Latsky’s intentions for the project.

with my physical presence. With the very aspects of my body that people may recoil from (Diane Duggan, [heidilatskydance.org](http://heidilatskydance.org)).

In Duggan's reflection on her involvement in "ON DISPLAY," "aging flesh" can be seamlessly replaced with "disabled body." Her experience is one of otherness, of misfitting with her dance environment that not only praises able bodies, but young bodies.

The presence of disabled dancers cripps the normative standards of Western concert dance. These ballet, modern, and postmodern dance styles define the beauty as a dancer who is able-bodied and symmetrical, performing with an effortlessness that masks exertion or demonstrates an efficiency of muscular expenditure. Disabled bodies are often considered ugly ones and that ugliness is heightened when positioned against the beauty standards of the concert dance world. If a disabled dancer is asymmetrical and dependent on a device for support, it is assumed that they cannot participate in the performance of concert dance. Despite their misfitting, the presence of physically integrated dance companies and performance projects allow disabled dancers to thrive. Whether they execute the same movements as their able-bodied peers or highlight their different and unique corporeal form in their performance, these dancers demonstrate that every kind of body has the potential to dance and to dance beautifully. Garland-Thompson writes, "By merging the visual and the narrative, body and word signify together in an act of self-making that witnesses the liberatory potential of disability performance acts" (39). Replacing "narrative" with "choreography" and "word" with "movement" makes the same claim. In their performance, disabled dancers dance the story of their bodies that has been suppressed and told by others for so long. Disabled dancers not only demand a reconfiguring of the expectations for Western concert dance, but a rethinking of how we view disabled bodies

more broadly. Rather than static, dependent, and ugly, disabled bodies, whether they are dancing or not, are active, independent, and beautiful.

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