

The Echoes of History, a Personal Professional Meditation

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Hello Therí. This is Jill Reich calling from Bates College. I'm very pleased to be calling and... and... uh perhaps you can think why and that is that we would very much like to have you to join us on the faculty here at Bates. So, I'm calling to talk about an offer. Um, it's Tuesday afternoon about uh 5:30. I'll be in the office for about another half hour. You can reach me tomorrow at uh 207-786-6066. I'm afraid I'm going to be at meetings most of the evening. Uh, but I'm going to send you an email and, uh, we really look forward to talking and hope that uh we can work something out so that you can join us here at Bates. Thanks, Therí, and I'll talk to you soon. Bye-bye.

This voicemail is from Tuesday, March 8, 2011.

It was a moment of professional triumph. It was also a moment of fear.

I had an offer for a tenure-track job, but I had to negotiate the parameters. I hasten to add that few of us know the art of negotiation and seldom do we learn in graduate school. Though I had great mentors (still do!), this process was daunting nevertheless. I needed to negotiate aspects of my career that most junior faculty think about: a base salary increase, course reduction for the first two years, start-up funds, teaching development, and a deeper reserve of conference travel funds. Books like *The Academic Job Handbook* advise job seekers on best practices in contract negotiation. Noticeably absent, for me at least, was advice on how best to negotiate aspects of my career related to my disability: digital access to my classroom so that I could teach remotely in case of illness, physical access to both my office and classrooms in case of inclement weather, accessible housing within scooter distance to the campus, increase in the yearly conference funding allowance because traveling with a disability is expensive. When Bates' former Dean of Faculty Jill Reich called to "work something out," I am certain that she knew she would need to consider my disability. Nonetheless, joining the faculty at Bates seemed like it would be an exercise in trying to create a separate but equal working space¹ in a place where ableism was assumed to be a common denominator between employees.

I am grateful that Drs. Dana Williams and Kendra R. Parker saw fit to include me in this necessary publication. I want to give a special thank you to Dr. Shanna Benjamin for her adroit assistance in helping me make this rage eloquent (*pace* Brittney Cooper).

¹ The reference to *Plessy v. Ferguson* is very much intended. The separate but equal doctrine still exists as part of the de facto segregation for the disabled.

Though the conversations about my disability and my tenure-track life were supposed to be separate—that is, my discussions with administrators about contract terms that were negotiable and our dialogues about disability accommodations that I was legally entitled to—they happened with the same parties during the same meetings. Simultaneously negotiating my contract perks and outlining disability needs risked conflating the two and negating the urgency of the latter. In other words, adding my needs for disability requests to the list of terms I was already negotiating could have been viewed as asking too much or understood as interchangeable with other requests. For example, could administrators read my desire for more conference funding as an exploitative move that was all about being able to travel more on Bates' dime?² The dean could have asked whether an increase in base salary meant that I could personally underwrite costs associated with creating accessible housing. Ultimately, in a town where most housing near the campus is owned by the college and none of it is accessible, the school had to create the parameters for me to be able to join the faculty and work at Bates. Plainly put, I cannot work where I cannot live.³ Further, these requests for access were not a question of if they could/should be done but rather how they needed to be done. That list was, in effect, not really negotiable. You'll note that I used the auxiliary verb "could" to describe the privileged reaction of hemming and hawing about disability. I use this verb specifically to remind folks that regardless of my experience, this privilege affects the possibilities for the disabled in an ableist world.⁴

During March 2020, much of the world began to work from home, learn from home, and shelter-in-place. I certainly was saddened to see daily activities, travel plans, and socialization nearly grind to a halt. I was also deeply concerned that people would not care about the vulnerable and the marginalized, those whose experience of local and national pandemic directives was exacerbated by preexisting conditions. Since I fit into these categories, I was also deeply afraid. And, I was angry. I am still angry. Actually, I am enraged. The constant messages to stay six feet apart and wash your hands meant that now folks had to pay attention

² I hasten to add that these kinds of questions and more have been actually asked.

³ Some readers who are not familiar with the life of a small liberal arts college may balk at the idea that the college should provide housing. However, the social landscape of a small liberal arts college relies on the community that surrounds the college. That includes the faculty who live there. In some cases, faculty who cannot find housing cannot take these positions. This is part of the reason small liberal arts colleges own property, to diminish the financial barrier for incoming faculty. For me, this barrier would have been financial as well since the ADA would allow for me to alter a residence, but I would also have to pay to make it accessible, a cost-prohibitive venture in this case.

⁴ As always, grammar matters. The auxiliary verb and the subjunctive mood will indicate that I am speaking about possibilities, not just for myself, but for other disabled scholars as well.

to contagion in ways they hadn't before. As an immuno-compromised person, I have had to exit the bathroom after people who do not wash their hands and avoid large crowds for fear of getting seriously ill. I have also had to ward off people who hug usually without consent. Internally, my reaction is: *You're a hugger? So, that means you get to touch me without consent and endanger my health with your germs? I don't think so.* Externally, I have to fend off the unwanted advances of people who wish to be free to violate my boundaries and body. I set boundaries to protect my health and physical well-being only to be met with suspicion around my motives and disbelief about the severity of a hug. People's protests against following these rules clarified that they never want to live like me. People balked at the possibility of a temporary life with only some of the cautions I have had to live with for years. I watched them say they couldn't take it. I watched them imply my life wasn't worth living if it had to be lived like this.

I also observed people demonstrate how little they care for the vulnerable. Those cute little memes about boredom and the praise of the great pause—those are two sides of the same coin. Each makes too much and too little of the privilege of being able to leave one's home. So many of the disabled have limited social interaction because places to gather are not accessible physically, culturally, or socially. This does not just include restaurants, but also concerts, library stacks, museums, theatres, and stores.⁵ Few of the conversations about staying at home accounted for several facts: that some people have been forced to stay at home for years; some people will need stay at home for years; some people are too under-resourced to stay at home; and, some are unsafe at home. It is a privilege to talk about boredom. It is a privilege to view this as a break.

More to the point of this essay, the COVID-19 work-from-home orders meant that now most jobs were accessible. Part of the reason I went into the academy was because I knew my elite degree would not have overridden my Blackness and disability if I needed accommodations like work-from-home.⁶ That is, getting workplace "accommodations" for a nine-to-five office job is not a guarantee despite the Americans with Disabilities Act. For physical access issues, employers can claim that changes to infrastructure are too expensive. For the desire to work from home, employers can twist job requirements such that working from home appears to be unreasonable.⁷ Keeping in mind that Black folks are often thought of as lazy and asking too much, my requests could be considered a desire to "get over" rather

⁵ The Metropolitan Museum of Art is part of a long-term initiative called "Crip the Met" designed to bring access to the museum in multiple ways, including the descriptions of art, physical access, and auditory access, among others.

⁶ My undergraduate degree is from Princeton University.

⁷ Many employers are now deploying this logic to get people back into the workplace.

than a need to “get through.” Keep in mind also that disability does not coincide with capitalist notions of production. The disabled are understood as drains on resources. Supposedly, we are not worth the resources expended on us because our lives are less valuable. During discussions about the novel coronavirus and hospital capacity, disabled people knew that when the calculus was done to determine whose lives were worth saving, we would not be on the list. In employment, this amounts to the disabled being paid below minimum wage and not having opportunities to work at all.⁸

I want to be clear.

This is not a bourgeois-ification of Black Lives Matter in the wake of COVID-19. This is not some petty professor’s rebuke based on what she did or did not receive. What the novel coronavirus reveals is that disabled Black folks are not free. COVID-19 exacerbated long-standing issues for Black disabled folk. It killed us and is killing us in record numbers. This is the heft of intersectional feminism. This is me “[realizing] that the only people who care enough about us to work consistently for our liberation are us. Our politics evolve from a healthy love for ourselves, our sisters and our community which allows us to continue our struggle and work” (Combahee River Collective 264). Disabled Black folks do not have adequate housing, health-care, access to food, communities, and safety, among other resources. People’s reaction to COVID-19 revealed long-standing ableist attitudes and reliance on long-standing ableist structures. People who don’t want to follow the rules or be careful because it is their prerogative may be killing someone. People who are frustrated at this new reality ignore the fact that some of us have had to live like this for years. People who denigrate services online and who are in a rush to get things “back to normal” are in a rush to relegate us back to the margins.

I wish someone would have something to say about my strident affect. “What I have is anger,” in the words of Brittney Cooper. “Rage, actually. And that’s the place where more women should begin—with the things that make us angry” (2). My anger comes from the desire to protect and defend Black disabled people: our histories, our traditions, our rights, our lives. I am angry COVID-19 revealed and continues to reveal how much racism and ableism govern American life. I am angry Black folk were and are dying in record numbers because of the high levels

⁸ Here, I refer to the HR582 Raise the Wage Act 2019, which has not yet been passed. It was first introduced to the House of Representatives by Robert Scott (D-VA). The law would raise minimum wage to \$15.00 over a period of seven years. It also would preclude states from paying people with disabilities below minimum wage. Proponents of the law say it would result in economic self-sufficiency for people with disabilities. Opponents of the law say it would eliminate many jobs designated for the disabled altogether.

of co-morbidity in our communities and the limited resources we have to receive quality care and secure gainful employment. I am angry Black disabled folk were and are dying in record numbers. These facts were not met with a turn to Black disabled people for wisdom or insight. Instead, national coverage elides the virus's impact on Black folk and neglects to mention disability as a salient factor. This time disability was called by other names for the purpose of erasure. Had it not been, Black disabled epistemologies would be instructive for the current moment.⁹

As I have written elsewhere, Black women's anger, in this case Black disabled women's anger, is a generative, community-building affective enterprise: "Black women's anger carries with it the weight of discourses meant to dismiss, deny, and disappear it. Yet, this anger (and all accompanying emotional and affective charges) remains even in the refusal of it" (29). Even as others refuse to engage with Black disabled people's perspectives, my anger remains. Along with it, I gather a few final thoughts about what Black disabled epistemologies offer at a time when people are encountering the structures of ableism for the first time and when people (seemingly for the first time) are truly outraged about racism.¹⁰

First, Black disabled folks have a history of survival. Consider the pseudoscience concocted to control slave populations (i.e., *drapetomania* was the mental illness that made slaves run away and to cure it slaveholders were instructed to cut off body parts) or to justify Jim Crow legislation (i.e., Black people are too feeble-minded to vote; Black people are too diseased to live near). Black people were navigating disability as a discourse. You see, much like race is a social construct, so too is disability. During those eras, Black literature bears witness to the particular survival strategies Blacks used when disability was used against them: Harriet Jacobs's disability as a result of desiring freedom from the garret, Frederick Douglass's manipulation of others' belief in his stupidity in order to gain literacy, and James Weldon Johnson's manipulation of ableist rhetoric as tool for surviving anti-Blackness. Further, Black writers depict the lived experience of impairment as a complex lived experience as well as a critique of American capitalism and racism. William Attaway's *Blood on the Forge* (1941), Chester Himes's *Lonely Crusade* (1947), August Wilson's century cycle, Toni Morrison's entire corpus, Nalo Hopkinson's entire corpus, and Octavia E. Butler's entire corpus include the experiences of Black disabled folk and their tools of survival. These characters are not perfect representations of disability politics. These characters are not metaphors about disability. They are not sentimental representations. Instead, they pinpoint the complexity of how one survives while being both Black and disabled.

⁹ It is important to note that there have been significant Black disabled voices on social media including Imani Barbarin, Vilissa Thompson, Keah Brown, and Leroy Moore.

¹⁰ I highly encourage readers to examine the wealth of quality scholarship in Black Disability Studies.

Second, Black disability is a generative space. We create. We do not have to dig deep into Black history to think about the figures who altered the world while having a disability. This list is by no means exhaustive. Harriet Tubman. Stevie Wonder. Henry “Box” Brown. Lorraine Hansberry. Toni Braxton. Tionne “T-Boz” Watkins. Ramon Reed. Octavia E. Butler. Blind Lemon Jefferson. Audre Lorde. Venus Williams. The list goes on. We are so accustomed to remaining silent about disability, that we do not know the impact disability has had on Black culture. At times, this is because disability is called by other names like “the sugar” for diabetes or “touched” for someone who has cognitive impairment or mental health concerns. When this occurs, disability becomes so much a part of the landscape that the impairment itself and all that it shapes is rendered invisible. At other times, we do not know the impact of Black disability because disability remains ensconced in shame. Given the long history of associating Blackness with disability, Black folks (including some Black disabled folks) shun the association with disability and opt for stories about themselves that diminish or disregard disability as generative.

Third, Black disability is nimble. During the initial shelter-in-place orders, people were confused and upset about how they were going to live in quarantine. I will not go so far as to say that Black disabled people did not share these anxieties. However, I will point out that the crises of imagination around work and play assumed many so-called truths that are the purview of white people and the abled. For instance, some people could not figure out how to create community. Because Black disabled people often lack the resources to do many tasks on their own, they rely on community and the interdependence of people. It is a privilege to assume that you can do it all on your own. It is also a lie. But, that’s another matter. Since the communities we rely upon are often under-resourced, we find ways to get what we need. Here is the nimble-ness. We pivot because we have to. If we don’t, we don’t survive.

If we don’t, we don’t survive.

That is the lesson of the pandemic for me: We will survive because we have to. Black disabled people could not foresee the novel coronavirus. But, we could foresee the disregard for our lives, the way capitalist gain would trump public health, the lust for violence against the vulnerable, and the dismissal of our epistemologies.

But, still we know what we know.

Black disability has been here. Black disability is everywhere. We have a history. We have stories. We are legion.

Works Cited

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