Teaching Anthropology

2021, Vol. 10, No. 1, pp. 71-74.

The Body Perfect: On Disability, Experience and the Aesthetics of Expertise.

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Abstract

This is a provocation. It does not aim for a seamless narrative. The erudition and argument that create narrative smoothness are identified, here, as indexes of the aesthetic values that define Brazilian and British academic training, values that I would like to unpack. Specifically, the suppression of those experiences perceived as less than perfect is what concerns me. Through my experiences as a Deaf anthropologist, I reflect on the relation between aesthetic values, a powerful need to maintain "the body perfect" and, consequently, labour separate from personal experience in Brazilian and British universities. By reflecting on how "the body perfect" emerges through a protection of whiteness, I also hope to begin to explore the relation between racism and ableism that infuses academic aesthetics of expertise. In doing so, my provocation contributes to opening up spaces where reimagining diversity can actually take place in the academy.

Keywords: Disability, Deafness, Aesthetics, Experience, Whiteness.

Confession

This short provocation is composed by a series of connections and disconnections. My objective is to foreground a paradox, critical for contemporary academics everywhere to think about, and particularly for anthropologists to reflect on consistently and explicitly in discussions about diversity: how do and should we contend with the desire to contribute to a different world as researchers and teachers, within institutions that by their very nature exclude and discriminate? For the purposes of this piece, I will call this the "diversity paradox" because it pertains so well to this double-edged noun for institutional discussions and activities that do very little – inhibiting our desire to participate – as well as the embodied knowledge that *so much more* has to be done – impelling us to take part. My focus on disability in the Brazilian and British cases, as I articulate them here, are just that: examples of particular (and yet generalizable) struggles within academia, chosen as a result of personal experience, but which serve as invitations for further reflection.

In that vein, I'll begin with a confession: in some senses, I am not an "expert" on disability. For the last twenty years, my anthropological research has been with street children in Rio de Janeiro and with *quilombolas* (maroons) in the Brazilian Amazon. My written work and teaching have mainly been about ethnic identity, gender and race; the policies and practices of social inclusion and exclusion; the politics and cosmology of racial discrimination and ecocide; and the multifaceted struggle for Black and Indigenous collective life in Brazil. From a more formal perspective then, I am – academically speaking – a novice regarding disability. However, I am Deaf and have been for the last fifteen years; that is, for much of my career as an anthropologist, half spent in the Brazilian academy and half in the UK – reflecting a whole life spent between Brazil (my native country) and London, my adopted home.

Initially, knowing that I wanted to write about disability rather than race and gender for this special issue, my internalised opposition between experience and expertise was activated. This is not because my experience of discrimination as a Latin American woman in the UK has not influenced my academic work so far. However, over the years I devoted myself to the scholarly labour that allowed me to consider discrimination from a less experiential perspective, as I was trained and trained myself to believe that, by doing this, my work would be *worth more*, and as I avoided the painful work of attending to those experiences. In relation to race and gender specifically, I have been trying to undo this training for a few years now, but when it came to writing about disability it was activated once again; I started by considering the literature that I needed to engage with.

However, the timeframe for writing and the reality of my schedule at work (and at home), meant that it would not be possible to go down that route.

I had to change my plan for this piece and I became quite anxious. I thought about telling the organizers that I would not be able to take part after all. Instead, my desire to write about disability – the instinct borne of personal experience that I *had to* start writing about it – spoke louder. I took a step back and I began to go through the phrases that I was repeating to myself, and which worried me: "I won't know enough"; "I won't know the main authors to engage with"; "I won't be able to write well about this"; "I won't have a clear point to make". I cancelled out my own experience as a Deaf person because I felt I lacked the erudition and the argument needed to speak academically about disability and teaching. I began to consider how my anxiety was linked to my academic training in Brazil and in the UK. To think about the multitude of times that I had heard – in relation to work on race and gender – that we should avoid "identity politics" and focus on theoretical contributions. Taking a step back from this not only helped the anxiety to subside, it also progressively pushed me to think about the aesthetics of expertise I had internalised, how it relates to what we consider to be "only" personal experience, and how important this opposition is in different ways in Brazilian and British academia, and in anthropology particularly.

Disconnection

It is something that I puzzled over for a long time: ever since I returned to Brazil in 2003, after an adolescence spent in the UK, and especially after I started my MA in Social Anthropology at the Museu Nacional in Rio de Janeiro in 2004. I remember thinking at that time how everyone seemed to know so much, how everyone seemed to read so much, and remember it all. I remember how different it felt to my undergraduate training in anthropology in the UK, where argument was all that mattered – something that I had also found incredibly frustrating. I was suddenly taken aback by the paucity of my knowledge, as my fellow postgraduate students competed over how many pages they could read per day, or who had read everything every week, or who had read everything that had ever been written by Nietzsche, or Marx, or Foucault, or whoever else.

I felt completely excluded from these conversations, even though I had also passed the competitive entrance exam to the Museu. I soon learnt that this was reflected in the style of teaching there and at other departments in Brazil, as well as in how people conducted ethnography, and in how MA and PhD theses were too often evaluated: it was too much about what might be missing from the bibliography, what small detail of information you might have missed in the field. It was almost all about expertise (how much you knew about a specific topic) and erudition (how well you could articulate that knowledge). As a result, and as the stakes got higher, I saw my peers at the Museu burn out mentally and/or fail to complete their Master's or PhDs: their cries turned to chorus, "I'm a failure", "I haven't read enough", "I don't know enough", "I haven't done enough fieldwork", and so on.

I realise now that this emphasis on expertise and erudition reflected a particular style of academic production in Brazil, which came alongside other more constructive facets – not least, in anthropology, attention to detail and dedication to the poetics of everyday life. As I delved into that style I absorbed the poetics, while trying and often failing to discard the elitist allegiance to one or other cannon and the competitive approach to research. As I moved between Brazil and the UK for my PhD, I began to reflect on the British style that I had first been trained in, its emphasis on argument, logic and clarity above everything, and how it was steeped in a passive-aggressive superiority complex: in Empire, White innocence (Wekker 2016), and misogyny. In this way, over the years it has become clear to me how, in different ways and in different contexts, when not held accountable to personal experience, academic aesthetics of expertise reproduce violent and exclusionary institutional and intellectual frames.

Progressively I have come to develop my own style, and in doing so create something that can hopefully be more honest and more compassionate than either the British or Brazilian styles I have been taught. A style that is less about having a point or an argument, less about how much I have read or know, and much more about experience and fallibility. However, it has taken twenty years for me to find the confidence to do that. I am keen to give others a starting advantage, while considering how my experience as a Deaf person might have helped me to perceive the fault-lines that have kept me questioning both sides. To do this, I believe that looking at the smoothness, the perfection that is implied in the Brazilian aesthetics of expertise/ erudition and the British aesthetics of argument, through the peculiar ears of someone whose communicative strategies with the expert

hearing world are the very opposite of smooth – that is, composed by disconnection and misunderstanding – might be a useful place to begin.

Connection

> I was wondering if she said something worth hearing. What? I'm looking at her face and trying to read it, not a clue what she said but I'll just say yeah and hope. Me, Tabitha and her aunt are waffling in Waffle House by the Mississippi River. Tabitha's aunt is all mumble. She either said *do you want a pancake?* Or *you look melancholic.* (Raymond Antrobus, *The Perseverance*)

"*Você é cheia de coisa, né Júlia*?" – "You're full of things aren't you, Julia?" was the phrase that stuck, and every so often it comes to mind. It was spoken by a friend and fellow anthropologist in 2011/12, when I was still writing my PhD thesis, living in Rio, my city. It was not meant as an insult, I think, but at some level it felt to me like there was some odd sense of purpose in it. She asked me this question as I prepared to leave my home for an ENT (Ear, Nose and Throat) appointment, and after I told her where I was heading. We had been living together for a few months and in that phrase my friend was noting that as well as being Deaf, I was also asthmatic, that I have allergies, among other medical complaints – things that were unknown or unnoticed before, and that the close living arrangements made all too obvious.

It seemed like there was some disappointment mixed with satisfaction in my friend's question. Both, I believe, came from the mix of admiration and competitiveness that drove our friendship, which began during our Master's. But I have often wondered whether some of the satisfaction came from the feeling that my friend had that she was different to her family, that she was not someone who did not have close relations with people who were not "strong and healthy", as she put it once. That she did not discriminate. Still. The phrase stuck. I remember the scene vividly if I close my eyes; the slight smile on my friend's face; the light flooding in; I was in my room, I think; she was standing by my door. Why did the phrase stick?

It stuck in me not only because it was hurtful that someone so close could so carelessly and satisfyingly want to highlight how I might be made of a collection of things that somehow made me different to and less than her, but also because she had observed a clear truth: I *had* been hiding myself, she was right. I had not been sure what to do with this private version of myself in Rio. What I knew, from my experience in Brazil in general and as an academic, and as I came to accept that I was losing my hearing, was that my disabled body was something that I should not draw attention to. Colleagues who had chronic conditions and disabilities around me were very careful not to make their conditions visible, not to ask for help. Burning out seemed to be better than showing weakness, flaws; things that would have pierced the intense competition that characterised the academic space in which we were all involved. At the same time, colleagues and peers would comment openly, and in an almost pleasureful way, on the physical characteristics of those who might have a "thing". In one particularly disturbing remark, a peer commented that she had finally found something beautiful about a brilliant, disabled colleague – his hands, she said, matched his words.

The connection between beautiful words and physical beauty, the word perfect and the body perfect, as I will call them here, became very clear to me during my postgraduate training in Brazil. I believe that in part this is a question that emerged as I was struck by the very different styles of academic narrative produced in the UK and in Brazil, as mentioned before. My in-between-ness in the UK and in Brazil, as neither being British enough nor, apparently, Brazilian enough was in the end the only position that I could take. Doing so eventually allowed me to see the distinctions and overlaps between two profoundly violent narrative modes and to wrestle with the disappointing knowledge that I had worked hard to emulate both in order to fit in. This acquired chameleon-like capacity was the key reason why I did not talk about or acknowledge my deafness within my academic practice for many years. For why I spent so long pretending that I did not need a hearing aid. For why I spent so long pretending to hear people.

Disconnection

I'll call this my attempt to pass as able-bodied, and as soon as I started writing about that I was struck by twenty years of experience, not of my own disability, but of my research about exclusion and racism in Brazil: about the colour of "perfection" in Brazil. Given the constraints I cannot go far enough or deep enough on this here, but what is clear to me is that the relation between the word perfect and the body perfect in academia in Brazil, as elsewhere, reflects racialization and the perfection attributed to, the protection afforded to whiteness, there, as

elsewhere: or as Nirmal Puwar (2004: 56) puts it "the co-constitutive relationship between the body of the universal human and universal space(s)".

In the UK, it feels to me that the question of access that permeates the relation between disabled people and different institutions does the same. Here, it is all about the labour – a universal human practice – that cannot be held accountable to the personal: the extra labour that disabled academics have to undertake to have access, reflects the extra labour that I had to undertake to have access as a Latinx person growing up here, the extra labour that all Black people and People of Colour have to undertake, to greater and lesser degree. In Brazil, it feels to me like perfection, or at least, the emphasis on the appearance of perfection reeks of the protection of whiteness: the nationalist project that defines Brazilian racial politics. As Brazilian anthropologists Jaime Alves and João Vargas (2017: 267) put it, in Brazil there is a "socially shared and generative symbology that, while dependent on black abjection, naturalises the relationship between whiteness, belonging, and life." To me, that naturalised relationship, in its dependence on corporeal abjection, is also dependent on an idea of corporeal superiority (as norm) that is equally present in British obstacles to "access": in the bulletproofing of universal (perfect) labour against personal experience.

Disconnection

Snip. The obstetrician simulated scissors cutting a tube. I was pregnant in São Paulo. The obstetrician asked me whether I had any known medical conditions. "Oh, I am Deaf. I have otosclerosis[i]". That was my diagnosis. "Oh, he said. Well don't you have an ENT doctor?" "Yes" I answered. "Well, we'll have to talk to him. Because pregnancy can make your hearing worse. So maybe we'll do a caesarean and then we can just. Snip", I looked at him without understanding. "You won't want another child. If you had known before, maybe you wouldn't be here now." Furious. I went home and did what I have been trained to do, I researched. The sterilisation of women with otosclerosis has been a standard universal "treatment" since the early twentieth century, initiated by eugenicists in the US and in Europe (Lippy et al. 2005; Tange 2019), to control hearing loss and prevent genetic susceptibility to the condition.

What is perfection? That is the question that circulates in my mind in relation to disability anywhere, because being (dis)abled, implies there is a perfect, able body somewhere. So, what is at stake when perfection is presumed as standard, particularly when it (the standard) is not articulated as such? What happens when we put a spotlight onto it? Do our assessment criteria for hiring and for students reflect a mode of thinking that aims to remove "imperfection" (traces of the personal)? Is this what we want for our discipline? Or do we want to challenge the (body) perfect as the longed for standard?

I believe that these are the questions that will also allow for us to go beyond the "diversity paradox" that both propels and inhibits our capacity to participate and to be more inclusive. "Diversity" as an institutional concept is also defined by its standardised opposite, the universal human, the body perfect: it is a crucial part of this contemporary institutional paradox. Making expertise accountable to personal experience allows academic aesthetic values – and therefore academic institutions more broadly – to be based on something else: rather than the opposition of perfect and imperfect, a generous perception of beauty that is open above all to miscommunication, allowing for re-imagination to be the propeller for thought not just at the end of it all, but first and foremost.

Notes

[i] Otosclerosis is a condition caused by "abnormal bone remodelling" in the middle ear causing the stapes to become stuck in place – as the bone is unable to vibrate sound cannot travel through to the inner ear.

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Acknowledgments
This paper was first presented at the workshop "Living with Disabilities in the Global South", organised by Dr. Kelly Robinson, and I would like to thank her for the tremendous support always with these initial attempts to write about disability. I would also like to thank Gabriel Dattatreyan, Avery Delany and Sara Bafo for the dialogue during this Special Issue's publication process.

Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.