

Girl Breaking Glass: Reflections on Embodied Identity

Each one other / is having a different weather – Gwendolyn Brooks, *Boy Breaking Glass*

For a long time I believed it was better to be no one in particular. «I didn't want to fall into the identity trap,» a friend said, when we were talking about how we didn't take the specialized literature courses in college, but wished we had. There were the perceived problems of tokenism and marginality, if the topic was in some way a match to experience, in my case, of disability. (The supposed intellectual ghettos of subjugated epistemologies.) On the other hand, concerns about voyeurism and assimilation if the topic belonged to another group. (The supposed illegible codes of others' suffering.) It seemed too fraught. So I was drawn to the strangers in mainstream literature, the anonymized suffering of the absurd, in some cases warriors.

The obvious but often ignored flaw in trying to be no one in particular is that it is impossible.

I recently read about the Combahee River Collective, a group of Black Feminists founded by Barbara Smith in the 70s. I was surprised I'd never learned about the Combahee River raid that the collective took its name from, which Harriet Tubman of underground railroad fame planned and led. Because the Combahee River is in South Carolina, the state that I am from.

Then I remembered hearing around when I was growing up that the underground railroad was a failure in some respects and gave false hope—*around*, the way I heard every racial slur. I remembered how the policing of worthiness completely suffused my environment. And I was no longer surprised. In a similar way I was surprised, but only temporarily, to learn Harriet Tubman experienced a head injury in her teens (a heavy piece of metal was thrown at her), resulting in epilepsy, visual impairment, and vivid dreams. This experience is omitted or euphemized in most descriptions of her life, maybe because it is considered uninteresting, unimportant, or embarrassing.

The Combahee River Collective statement includes:

«We are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives.»

This invitation can also be imagined to encourage the fight against oppression of people with disabilities, not just because the Collective is named after a raid made possible by a visually impaired and epileptic woman, but because of its open and dynamic nature. As Mary Wilkins Freeman writes, every builder builds for somewhat unknown purposes, and is in some measure a prophet.

Adrienne Rich, Muriel Rukeyser, Alice Walker, and Mary Wilkins Freeman, are retrieved as feminists with disabilities in the 1987 literary anthology *With Wings*, edited by Marsha Saxton and Florence Howe. In *A Dream of a Common Language*, Rich writes, “Yet you know you exist and others like you, that this is a game with mirrors. It takes some strength of soul—and not just individual strength, but collective understanding—to resist this void, this nonbeing, into which you are thrust, and to stand up, demanding to be seen and heard.”

My reason for starting to read around questions of intersectionality and identity studies came from working on a long essay drawing on my life and experiences as a woman with visual loss who has survived some traumas and expatriated. When I first studied the crafts of nonfiction and poetry, I wrote about objects and used found materials. Over the years I shifted to writing about rocks, then plants. I found living beings intimidating and problematic.

I used to take pride in keeping the secrets of my life, in hiding, in detailed invisible archives of an intense struggle. Like a double agent. I thought it was funny (in a way) that as a blind woman I was teaching courses on writing about photography. When teaching Camus' «A Happy Death», with my gorgeous guide dog sleeping in the corner, I made no note of the opening assisted suicide of the rich man in a wheelchair, the payment for which funds the hero's travels through the rest of the book.

I thought the right meanings, if there were any, would be obvious to the right people, and it was pointless to try to explain to anyone else. It wasn't my responsibility. I didn't have time for what I thought of as some minority revolution. I was busy showing that I could operate smoothly in the existing power structures that completely enclosed me.

This was a useful strategy given my circumstances and disposition. To paraphrase from Rukeyser's *Speed of Darkness*, I was working on the vocabulary of my silence. I am not saying it is better to be open and vocal about oneself. It's a personal choice. Speaking from the position of someone with a body and experiences is also contingent on elements that are always compromised in some degree-- timing, safety, and resources. But sometimes risk is worthwhile. Like that lettering on bus windows that reads *break in case of emergency*.

Speaking for myself, just as Herzog said «sometimes war dreams of itself,», sometimes war wakes up. In a long process that snapped into sense at a decisive moment, I realized that I'd been fighting. Anonymously. Absurdly. Strange to myself. For years my only weapons had been silence and bitter laughter.

Rosemarie Garland-Thompson, in «Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory, notes that the ability/disability framework touches all humans. We are all vulnerable, differing, and mortal bodies. We will all become disabled if we live long enough. She writes, «Feminist disability theory addresses such broad feminist concerns as the unity of the category woman, the status of the lived body, the politics of appearance, the medicalization of the body, the privilege of multiculturalism, sexuality, the social construction of identity, and the commitment to integration.»

Inhabiting, reading, or expressing from identity positions can be understood as a political activity, but it doesn't have to be. It could but doesn't have to be celebrated. One misconception I've encountered is that it is exclusive and static, rather than intersectional and adaptive, like the body itself

Like digestion, menstruation, sex, and dying, the activity of identity is rarely brought up in cafes or in poems. Whenever I say the word 'blind' out loud, there's a blush of silence, as if I'd just said 'penis'. As with the experiences of desire or despair, our vocabulary is shameful. The taboos

surrounding these fundamental ways of being protect our private worlds, but they also protect assumptions about their worth and regulation.

In the words of Alice Walker, no one is your friend who demands your silence.

If you bring any of this up, there will probably be discomfort. The soft gag of propriety, the awkward hunt for the nearest exit. There will be misunderstandings. There will be attempts to shame and dismiss you. You might get a reaction from someone who feels that your way of being threatens theirs. It might. Decide what to do about it. It's okay to mess up. Perfectionism is an affliction of ridiculous ableist ideals.

It's also possible you'll be responded to with a sign of solidarity.
Take heart, whoever you are.

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