

## **Crippling the tube: Explorations in Disabled Autobiography and Performance**

This essay came about through a conversation between myself and my friend, Misha, who is also a disabled performance artist, and is gender non-conforming, with Cerebral Palsy and deafness in one ear, both of which affect their coordination and balance. I have fibromyalgia and use a walking stick the majority of the time when I am in public, due to fatigue, pain and balance issues, as well as using it as a visual signal of my 'invisible disability'.<sup>1</sup>

I begin by noting these impairments because we both subscribe to the social model of disability, defined here by the Mental Health Foundation:

'The social model of disability proposes that what makes someone disabled is not their medical condition [impairment], but the attitudes and structures of society.'<sup>1</sup>

As such, we see disability as a lived experience rather than an intrinsic aspect of ourselves. I also note the ways in which our disabilities and other non-normative presentations are visible or invisible to others, since this impacts how people interact with us, and by extension, our experience of disability.

We are not using disability as an identifier, but rather as a context in which to view our stories, as people with impairments living in an ableist culture. As Alyson Patsavas states in 'A cripistemology of pain'

'Experience is often the most accessible resource disabled people can leverage when it comes to knowledge production.'<sup>2</sup>

By positioning ourselves in this way, we reclaim this form of knowledge production - academic theory - which disabled people are so often excluded from, with the intention of privileging our lived experiences at the same level as the theoretical texts which accompany them.

### **The Tube as a Disabling Space**

Misha and I were speaking about being disabled on public transport – the feeling of imbalance: in the literal sense, from the movement of the vehicle, and the figurative sense: inhabiting the liminal space between visibility and invisibility, of being both scrutinised and pointedly ignored. I recalled an incident when I was travelling in Berlin with a friend (something I wasn't sure I would be able to do since becoming ill), and, from exhaustion and lack of preparation for the

---

<sup>1</sup> "Social Model of Disability." Mental Health Foundation, <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/learning-disabilities/a-to-z/s/social-model-disability> (accessed 2019-03-29)

<sup>2</sup> Patsavas, Alyson, "Recovering a Cripistemology of Pain." in *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies* 8.2 (Liverpool University press, 2014 )206

movement of the train, I fell backwards onto the floor, bringing my suitcase down on top of me. I was quickly lifted to my feet by a man behind me, pulling me up by my arms. He barely even looked at me, didn't speak to me when I thanked him (possibly because he was German and I English), and quickly the carriage returned to normalcy, as if this interruption had never occurred.

I described this to Misha as something of a 'watershed moment', this experience of utter vulnerability, complete reliance on the physical aid of strangers. It was a moment when I truly felt disabled, burdensome in my inability to conform to the quiet self-containment of the space. It was embarrassing, so in a way I was grateful for my fellow passengers' lack of attention, but it revealed something about the culture of the train, the collective maintenance of certain codes of conduct, and what happens when we break them.

We noted that every disabled person we know seems to have one of these stories, primarily on public transport, of feeling either hyper visible or invisible as a result of their disability. The London underground is especially common as a location for this experience, due to the extreme concentration of people, the feeling of urgency and anonymity – and thus we came to the concept of the tube as a disabling space. This disabling effect is not limited to people with impairments, but to everyone in the space, to a greater or lesser degree. For example, it is considered somewhat strange to communicate with, or even acknowledge, strangers while using the tube. Despite extremely close proximity at peak commuting hours, you are expected not to make eye contact or speak to others, while your bodies may be centimetres apart, in order to maintain a lack of intimacy in the confined space.

The tube requires simultaneous embodiment and separation from one's body. If you are standing, you must brace against the movements of the train and of other commuters, while the majority of passengers also absorb themselves in their phone or copy of the Metro, distancing themselves from their surroundings and the mundane ritual of public transport. '*Public transport*' is also a contentious description. While the underground is indeed used by the public, once boarding, one is encased in a metal tube with a crowd of others, shooting through subterranean tunnels, only able to exit at specified points. To me, this feels like an intimate experience, unless everyone involves works to make it not so – which, of course, is the reason for these 'rules of the tube'

In 'Depression: a Public Feeling, Ann Cvetkovich says that

'the intimate rituals of daily life, where depression is embedded, need to be understood as a public arena, or alternatively as a semi-public sphere, that is, a location that doesn't always announce itself or get recognised as public but which nonetheless functions as such'<sup>3</sup>

believing that routine domesticity acts as a

'deceptive structure of feeling, the buffer that keeps bad feelings at bay, but, as the pervasiveness of depression suggests, an atmosphere that is also haunted by bad feelings.'<sup>4</sup>

Essentially, Cvetkovich asserts that everyday 'private' rituals are sites which manifest the 'bad feelings' caused by neoliberalism: depression, anxiety, worthlessness. While the tube is not technically domestic, I feel that the closed off nature of being underground, combined with the routine, self-contained practice of commuting, makes it a prime example of this concept. What is unique, however,

---

<sup>3</sup> Cvetkovich, Ann, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2012) 156

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

is the proximity to strangers, all of whom are reinforcing their own deceptive structures of feeling. This presents more potential for a breach of those structures, exposing the 'bad feelings' they conceal.

### Crippling the Tube

Both being performance artists, Misha and I wanted to think of a way to use the tube as a performance site, or, at least, subject. To somehow reveal the (literal) subterranean structures which keep it functioning as the optimal neoliberal mode of transport; getting from A to B as quickly and efficiently as possible, the destination usually being one's place of work. Both being activists, we wanted not only to reveal these structures, but to see if we could catalyse a change in them – to disrupt the individualised, dispassionate affect of the underground in favour of a communally caring one.

This aim, which could be described as 'cripping the space'<sup>ii</sup> might be achieved through a method called disidentification – largely developed by theorist José Esteban Muñoz - which essentially involves 'picking and choosing', or reinterpreting, aspects of normative culture which empower you, while choosing to discard the aspects which do not. This is intended for marginalised groups who have little space or representation for themselves, in order to allow them to reclaim normative spaces for their/our own.

'The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message's universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications.'<sup>5</sup>

So, what could this 'cripping the tube' look like? One conception of crippling for me is an intentional slowness, hindering the efficient progress of something, perhaps to the frustration of others. For example, slow walkers are especially despised in London – it is such a common subject of complaint on social media that it could be classed as memetic. People walk slowly for any number of reasons, and often not by choice, but in the frantic rush of the commute, empathy escapes us and other humans become obstacles for us to navigate. Becoming the source of such frustration through intentional deliberation - passive rather than active, yet still provocative in its difference - could be an interesting experiment in highlighting ableism in the space.

It could be questioned whether demanding people to slow down when they are operating in a neoliberal race for survival is problematic. However, by becoming disabled, we are forced into slowness, and thus must radically re-orientate our values and expectations in order to survive. We must practice vulnerability, becoming reliant on others when we cannot do things ourselves, we come to prioritise and value our emotional and physical energies, operating in 'crip time,' where time is less oriented around efficiency and more around embodiment/enmindment. While it may have disadvantages, I believe that this experiment in slowing down brings great potentiality for a more sustainable, collective way of being.

Another way of crippling the tube could be the simple act of taking up space, for example, asking for seats – an unapologetic request for support and access, which, despite clear signage to

---

<sup>5</sup> Muñoz, *José Esteban, Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1999), 31

affirm this, disabled people often feel too intimidated or afraid of judgement to make. By making these requests, we also ask for acknowledgement of our embodied experience from our fellow commuters, who must take stock of our needs and limitations, and how these might differ from their own. In *Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance* Judith Butler writes

‘The very term “mobilisation” depends on an operative sense of mobility, itself a right, one which many people cannot take for granted. For the body to move, it must usually have a surface of some kind, and it must have at its disposal whatever technical supports allow for movement to take place. So the pavement and the street are already to be understood as requirements of the body as it exercises its rights of mobility. No one moves without a supportive environment and set of technologies.’<sup>6</sup>

By requesting a seat, or simply existing in the space of the tube as visibly disabled people, we draw attention to this need for support, for ourselves and others. By insisting on using a space which is disabling to us, we maintain a space of literal mobilisation which has the potential as a site of radical change.

Instant message conversation between Misha and I discussing the performance. My words in Bold.

15:12

**Hey did you get a chance to write a bit about ur work?  
Doesn't have to be like formal, just to give me an idea**



Sorry yeah!

Been looking a lot into this idea of being off-balance as a disabled person and how that pervades most of my life and looking at applying it to different areas and using it in performance

So applying it to speech and writing

And what that might look like

Also I'm looking into this idea of annoyance or inconvenience

And how as a person with a disability that is often how I'm seen

And using this ability to make performance as well

**Ahh ok so what has that consisted of**



So a lot of the performance I do uses repetition

Repetitious language

And looping things

Also physically passing round a speaker emitting sound whilst talking and making it more difficult for people to hear in performance

---

<sup>6</sup> Butler, Judith, *Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance*, (Madrid: Instituto Franklin 2014) 3

I see



Or practicing writing that doesn't follow grammatical rules  
And isn't easily readable  
So like layers of writing

**So how do you feel like you want to be heard/supported in that? Like as a participant  
how can I engage in that communication**



Are you asking as a hypothetical participant?

**Cause that's kinda what I'm thinking about is negotiating different needs while  
maintaining our own boundaries**

**Yeah**



Aaaah I see I see  
I'm not entirely sure yet

**Yeah that's fine but something to think about/discuss later?  
I need to think about how I want to communicate**



They've kinda got to be slightly willing to be wound up I guess and willing to listen because  
of a lot of the performance could end up being quite noisy  
if we're making work together I wouldn't necessarily go down that route though

**Yeah I guess I'm wondering about us trying to communicate to each other  
In the context of an audience**

**Cause like me and Alice were talking about catalysing care so like when one person  
offers you a seat on the tube everyone becomes aware that they didn't**



Yeah performing with other people it would be less about annoyance  
Oooh I see!  
That's a really good point

**So I wonder how we could like have this two person 'conversation' which is heard by  
others and somehow catalyses care**



Yeah!

**And in a way we are an interruption by having that convo  
As 2 disabled body minds**

Anna Colwill



I think interrupting is a really important part of it

**Yeah for sure**



It could be as simple as having a conversation about disability on the tube in front of people

**Yeah**

**Also thinking about embodiment so you could still maybe use your sound looping etc**



But I think we should pick the noisiest tube aswell

**Cause for me it's about the challenges of negotiation difference while creating support**

**Yeah**



I think in terms of collaborating with another disabled performer that notion of how you can support each other is definitely essential

**Also something to think about is if/how we would record it**



We might need a third person there to do that  
I have a zoom mic we could use

**Cool!**

**I could maybe read my writing if I make notes on my tube journeys?**



Yeah!  
In the conversation?

**Yeah**

**Like just reading excerpts like a story**



I like that!  
I could also attempt writing on the tube

**That would be interesting**

**And you could do it with ur strange grammar and stuff if u wanted?**



And it's a weird one cos I feel like I'm not being disabled enough if I start reading/writing on the tube after asking for a seat

**Why would being able to read/write mean you didn't need a seat??  
You can do it on your phone aswell so ppl won't notice**



No I'll do it in a sketchbook  
I guess it's that thing of worrying that people will think I'm performing my disability  
Even though my disability doesn't stop me from doing those things

**Yeah I mean those thoughts are things to write if you feel able to**



Yeah I will for sure

**Nicee**



But yeah I definitely think it's about collectively making sure that our needs are met in  
performance

**Yeah  
I was thinking about active listening  
And maybe that can play a part**



Yeah! For sure!

**Like you know how one of the things that you are supposed to do is repeat back what  
you heard  
Maybe if one of us is telling a story the other will just repeat it back rephrased  
And we could change tubes when we switch over**



Yes yes yes!!  
There's something in the asking for a seat because of your disability and then getting off  
really quickly after getting the seat  
That I find quite funny

**Haa  
Do you think we should ask before we tell the story  
Or see if someone offers it when they hear the story**



I think we should try both

**Uhuh  
Do you mind if I archive this convo for my essay btw?**

Anna Colwill



Yeah do it!

Thanks 😊



The annoyance/inconvenience would have to be a collective one if we look at it as a thing where we're both being a nuisance to other people  
But supporting each other in being a nuisance to other people?  
Maaayybeee

**Yeah like we are only talking to each other  
But annoying bystanders  
Or perhaps provoking something for them**



yeaah exactly

**I wonder if we can get someone to record it without being too obvious  
Cause i feel like that might make it less effective?  
But also I guess there's an element of spectacle  
In the being filmed**



yeah we could just have the zoom mic on in one of our pockets?

Yeah tru



we need to consider the filmed thing more cos we're not really allowed to film on the tube

**Oh rlyly  
Yeah I think also we need to give space for anxiety cause ngl the thought slightly  
terrifies me  
Which isn't necessarily bad but in the spirit of supporting each other's needs we should  
think about our feelings around it too**



oohh yes definitely!!  
definitely!

Fab



Although these inconveniences to other commuters, such as slow walking or other breaches of tube etiquette, had a lot of potential, there was the issue of being trapped in an enclosed space with a group of people who we would possibly irritate, or even anger, with our performance. The idea of their negative responses made both Misha and I anxious; we wanted to come up with something which would make our experiences visible to fellow commuters without compromising our health and safety. One of the questions that has been central to my thinking in recent projects has been: how can disabled people practice collective, mutual care while also holding space for our individual limitations and capacities? We hoped to use this performance as a kind of experiment regarding this – trying to find ways to support each other in the precarious, disabling atmosphere of the underground, while attempting to find ways to address each of our personal needs and concerns as the performance developed.

A method of doing this which interested me was the practice of active listening – one technique of which is the repetition of what you have just heard, in order to demonstrate your reception of the information, as well as clarifying whether you have heard it correctly. As such, a verbal conversation between Misha and I seemed an appropriate method of conveying our experience, allowing for others to overhear, while avoiding forcing participation on them without their consent or leading to confrontation. This exchange of speaking and listening, on reflection, reminds me of Maeve Long's reference to Derrida's concept of 'the signature' in the *Auto-Bio-Thanato-Heterographical in Jaques Derrida*. He says that the auto biographer (in this case referring to Nietzsche)

'writes himself to the other who is indefinitely far away and who is supposed to send his signature back to him. His signature only takes place in the act of reception [...] It is in the act of reception by the reader that his identity is realised'<sup>7</sup>

In our performance, this would mean that the telling of our experiences is shaped by the ones that hear it – the direct recipient – Misha or I- and the more ambiguous group of recipients - our fellow commuters, depending on whether they choose to listen, or accidentally overhear, and whether they choose to respond. This allows for huge potentiality in the performance, since the direction it could take is dependent on the responses of those around us – it can only be 'completed' by listening bystanders. If repeated, the performance could take different trajectories each time.

As a form of research for the performance, I had been journaling my experiences of riding the tube – writing down my thoughts, feelings and interactions (or lack thereof) with the people around me. Eventually, we came to the idea of Misha making similar journals, and us reading them to each other while on the tube – the concept being that we would be having an exchange of speaking and listening between the two of us, as fellow disabled individuals, which would be overheard by those in our vicinity, effectively 'leaking' into their consciousness.

Again, this act of writing and reading our 'selves' relates to Maeve Long's writings on Derrida, in which she quotes Maurice Blanchot:

'To write one's autobiography, in order either to confess or to engage in self-analysis, or in order to expose oneself, like a work of art, to the gaze of all, is perhaps to seek to survive,

---

<sup>7</sup> Long, Maeve. 'The Auto-bio-thanato-heterographical' in *Jacques Derrida: Key Concepts*, ed. Claire Colebrook (London: Routledge, 2015) 15.

but through a perpetual suicide -a death which is total inasmuch as it is fragmentary. To write (of) oneself is to cease to be, in order to confide in a guest – the other -the reader. <sup>8</sup>

Blanchot here refers to the writing of the self as a kind of suicide, fragmenting the self through the sharing of it with another. In writing and sharing our stories with the commuters on the tube, Misha and I would make them participants in this fragmentation – forming a collective experience by intruding on the insular consciousness of the lone traveller.

## My Tube Journals

---

12.10pm 03/12 rotherhithe overground to new cross

on my way to a gp appt, early for once.

Got on the disabled carriage, lots of seats available, made eye contact with a young woman around my age, who was sitting in a priority seat, briefly before she looked away. I always overanalyse these glances and wonder whether, if I didn't have a walking stick, she would have noticed me get on. I wonder if she needs the priority seat or not, I'm sure people think the same about me. My lower back hurts. She's also getting off at new cross I think, she seems to be preparing to get up. I catch another man sitting near the doors looking at me confusedly? as I wait to get off he was furrowing his eyebrows and scratching his chin anyway

03/12 overground new cross to Canada Water

Plenty of seats, but not deserted. train is early. Caught another man's eye, he is jiggling his foot and looked up from his phone without moving his head until I made eye contact and he looked down again. Everyone is on their phone, including me. I need to make a phone call but it's a medical thing and I don't want people hearing about my IUD checkup appt. It's pissing it down, the windows are covered in a fine mist of raindrops. Briefly

---

<sup>8</sup> Long, 'The Auto-bio-thanato-heterographical', 13

Anna Colwill

made eye contact with a girl in a headscarf, she's not on her phone anymore

1.19pm Canada Water to bermondsey

One stop. Quite full but a couple of seats available. Brief eye contact with a woman, perhaps mid/late 30s? Angling my phone away from the man next to me so he doesn't see I'm typing this, he's also typing on his phone so he's probably not looking.

3.38pm overground rotherhithe to Whitechapel

I'm running late for a hospital appointment and my card needed topping up which slowed me down even more, I'm exhausted and sweaty from walking double speed to the station. This appointment always makes me anxious. Luckily the overground isn't too crowded, plenty of seats. I just want to ignore everyone and the woman opposite me doesn't look over as I sit down. My skin is awful today so I'm grateful.

5pm overground Whitechapel to Surrey quays

Honestly want to jump in front of the train the appointment was awful. Got on the wrong train because I got confused about the platforms and just got on without looking at the sign. Didn't even sit down at first because I was out of it. There's a man sleeping on the opposite row of seats. I saw the woman next to me, looking at someone/something, in the window reflection.

Surrey quays to NX

13/12/18 12pm bermondsey to green park

Crowded train, stand by the priority seats as there is no room elsewhere. lady in her 30s? She says oh! And immediately gets up for me. Chats to her friend sitting next to me. They're talking

Anna Colwill

about someone they know, it's not flattering.

12.12pm green park to Victoria

train seems crowded from outside and I go to stand initially, but there's actually a number of seats.

1.50pm Victoria to green park,

Crowded tube no seats. Stood next to an older lady sitting in a priority seat. My bag nudged her and I apologised. She looked down at my stick and then mouthed to ask if I wanted a seat. I said no, thank you I'm only on for one stop. I smiled at her as I got off and she smiled back.

2.04pm Green park to bermondsey

A number of seats left. A group of middle aged ladies get on, one asks another cheerily whether she would like to sit down, since she looks like she's struggling. A couple opposite me are kissing and leaning their heads together. A woman next to me is laughing at her male friend who is trying on a furry black hat. She is older but dressed like she is young, with big black boots, pigtails and a Star Wars bag. She occasionally leans on me as she faces towards her friend sitting next to her.

---

### Questions and issues

There were still some feelings of trepidation in executing the performance itself. We made plans to do it on the Northern Line, at 4pm (a notoriously busy route, just before rush hour, so as to be around a fairly large amount of people, but not so many that it became too difficult to perform),

but, as the day grew closer, I found myself hoping there would be a reason to cancel, and when Misha expressed similar feelings, we both decided to put it off.

I spoke to my tutor, who raised a number of questions around safety, ethics and motivations, which gave weight to my misgivings. Being a performance artist with anxiety (as is also true for Misha) I often find myself wrestling with the impulse to indefinitely postpone artistic work, either to avoid falling short of the ideal I have set for myself, due to fear of reactions from others, or simply making a fool of myself. I have, in a sense, embraced this impulse to not-do in the past few years, exploring concepts of labour refusal, critiquing the normative ideal for the contemporary artist/art student as ableist and exclusionary. Despite the often-anti-capitalist leanings of many contemporary art circles, especially in universities, there remains an ableist standard for what makes a successful or 'good' artist – being prolific, engaging in physically demanding processes, the ability to eloquently speak about one's work, attending inaccessible events. In performance art particularly, many of the most successful artists are those who undertake physically or mentally gruelling work, which often puts the performer in danger – for example, Marina Abramovich. As such, I have interrogated my own thinking around extremist performance in an attempt to unlearn these notions. Sometimes, however, my tendency to put off the work is a result of my own internalised ableism – perfectionism, or what has recently been pathologized/diagnosed as OCD.

It is often difficult to distinguish between these two feelings, which I will call here 'Helpful Anxiety' and 'Unhelpful Anxiety' (not using 'good' and 'bad', so as not to make value judgements.) In psychiatric discourse, Helpful Anxiety could be described as the 'fight or flight response' – the innate human instinct which warns us of danger – although in recent times, this has developed past hunting and gathering into something less easy to identify. Others might call it intuition. Helpful anxiety can be the feeling of discomfort in the gut upon meeting a new person – there is something wrong about them but we don't know what. We might push these feelings down and later find out that our anxiety was right. Our body-minds have ways of communicating with us, even when we resist listening.

Unhelpful Anxiety is not pure malfunction of the fight or flight response, or chemical imbalance in the brain, as the psychiatric field asserts (although these may contribute), but an internalising of neoliberal values which produce a constant need for self-improvement and production in order to prove our worth. An example of this, as mentioned above, is my resistance to make work which will inevitably be imperfect, in comparison to unrealistic capitalist notions of the ideal artist. On the other hand – part of my resistance to work is borne of a discomfort with the very ableist standards that are at play - a Helpful Anxiety. The result is the same, but the impulses are very different.

Misha and I discussed these feelings around our planned performance and our performance practices in general, asking: is this discomfort highlighting aspects of the performance which we might want to change, or which are being dictated by kyriarchal ideals? One of the issues we rested on was the often-confrontational nature of public performance art. By virtue of performing in places where art is not expected to be, a performer can forcibly involve spectators in their performance without their consent. While the gallery space creates a tacit agreement to experience artworks within its walls, performance art in public spaces can often come as an intrusion into the mundanity of people's everyday lives. This may be what the performer intends, but I question the tendency in art criticism to deem something as important, simply because it disturbs. For Misha and I, we were eager not to make the disabling atmosphere of the tube even more so.

Related to this, there was another concern – the framing of identity and oppression in the performance. We both explicitly identify our experiences as disabled, and this is a central aspect of the performance, but by othering the commuters who are not part of our conversation, we presume that they are not disabled. Perhaps we were inadvertently pinning the other travellers as ‘perpetrators’ and us as ‘victims’ of disablement, through the way we had structured our performance. What we did not initially consider is the presence of other disabled people on the tube, whose journeys might be made more difficult by our performance (for example, an autistic person who finds it hard to cope with unexpected changes to their routine.) Further to this, it caused us to question, who gets to identify as disabled? Are we excluding people from our community by requiring people to self-define in this way?

And on the question of identity, what about mine? Discussing issues of performance made me aware of the many different ‘I’s’ which I was/am trying to perform simultaneously. There is the (Disabled) Commuter – something that Misha and I were very aware of as a starting point for the performance; we feel an obligation to perform our disabilities while using the tube in order to earn the privilege of being offered a seat, or we can choose to attempt to go ‘in-cognito’ as a seemingly able bodied passenger, with all the benefits and costs which that entails. The Performance Artist, who must consider the mundane journey as part of an artwork, making every consideration significant in order to justify the work. The Academic, who must arrange all of this into a cohesive, theoretical argument. The patient, who must balance this work with her medical treatment, pushing through the haze and fatigue and emotional exhaustion of SSRI withdrawal and new medications. The friend, the organiser, the researcher. Maebh Long was surely right in calling autobiography a fracturing of the self – but how am I to balance these selves into a cohesive outcome? Perhaps it need not be cohesive, it can simply be.

### Conclusion

The main aim of this performance was to catalyse a caring collectivism which centres those affected by ableism. However, it became clear that we needed to broaden our conception of what that means, since accessing disabled identity itself is a privilege. As Judith Butler addresses the issue of identity politics in her essay *‘Imitation and Gender Insubordination’*,

‘being ‘out always depends to some extent on being “in”; it gains its meaning only within that polarity. Hence, being “out” must produce the closet again and again in order to maintain itself as “out. In this sense *outness* can only produce a new opacity; and the closet produces the promise of a disclosure that can, by definition, never come.’<sup>9</sup>

Although Butler is speaking here about lesbian identity, it could be argued that the same thing applies to disability, in the sense that to identify as disabled, one must differentiate themselves from the norm – the ‘able’, which in itself is an unattainable state which nobody can occupy. Even through the lens of the social model, disabled people are said to experience structural ableism due to societal devaluing of a physical or neurological difference. But this ‘difference’ implies an able ‘opposite’ to the disabled bodymind. This only serves to reinforce the idea of an identity being (as Butler terms it) a ‘bad copy’ of the original (here ability, for Butler, heterosexuality.) So, the question becomes, what

---

<sup>9</sup> Butler, ‘Judith, Imitation and Gender Insubordination’ in *Inside/out: lesbian theories, gay theories*, ed. Diana Fuss, (New York: Routledge 1991) 17

is the difference between experiencing ableism, which can happen to anyone, and being disabled? In a true social model, would not everyone be disabled since we all fail to meet ableist standards? Does this mean that everyone on the tube is disabled, by existing in the disabling space of the tube?

This binary of categorising bodyminds as able or disabled also fails to account for the vast spectrum of abilities and limitations of bodies which would fall into either category experience. To paraphrase Butler:

‘Is it not possible to maintain and pursue [able] identifications and aims within [disabled] practice, and [disabled] identifications within [able] practices?’<sup>10</sup>

This deconstruction of what constitutes disability and disabled identity has significant implications for the performance. If the question was originally: ‘how can disabled people practice collective, mutual care while also holding space for our individual limitations and capacities?’ Then we now must examine who falls into the category ‘disabled’, and as such, where the boundaries of our collective care lie. Where we might have seen ourselves as being the ‘us’ and the commuters the ‘other’ who we might try to bring in to our experience, the differences in our experiences now seem much blurrier.

The performance is just one exercise in exploring possible crip futures, and through planning it, it has become apparent that an important issue to unpack is that of the disability binary. It needs to hold space for the multiplicity of selves existing with all the participants; these selves may change or contradict one another, and the performance needs to allow for that. It must not be framed as a two way-exchange, but as a diffusion of sorts, in order to avoid privileging our narratives over those of the other participants. The performance should be a gentle catalyst towards a more caring space. While we tell our stories, this should also move to facilitate the autobiographies of others. It is, as yet, unclear how we will practically implement these intentions – it may be a matter of experimentation over several performances. In doing so we hope to slowly uncover and unpick the undercurrent of ableist anxiety within the tube, replacing it with a sense of community and care. Once we learn to do this in the disabling space of the tube, we may be able to apply this method to other disabling spaces, such as institutions.

1

---

<sup>10</sup> Butler, ‘Imitation and Gender Insubordination’ 17

Notes.

---

<sup>ii</sup> I use the term 'crip' (short for cripple), as used by Robert McRuer in his book *Crip Theory*, in a similar way to those who reclaim the term Queer as a term for LGBT+. It frames disability as an inherently political concept, taking back derogatory language which devalues physical and mental 'weakness' or 'deviance' and repurposing it as an empowering word.

### **Bibliography**

- Butler, Judith, '*Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance*', (Madrid: Instituto Franklin 2014) Accessed April 29, 2019.  
<http://www.institutofranklin.net/sites/default/files/files/Rethinking%20Vulnerability%20and%20Resistance%20Judith%20Butler.pdf>
- Cvetkovich, Ann. *Depression: A Public Feeling*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012.
- "Disidentification." Accessed February 19, 2019.  
<http://enculturation.net/files/QueerRhetoric/queerarchive/disid.html>.
- Fuss, Diana, ed. *Inside/out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*. New York: Routledge, 1991.
- Long, Maebh. 'The Auto-bio-thanato-heterographical' in Jacques Derrida: Key Concepts', ed. Claire Colebrook (London: Routledge, 2015)
- McRuer, Robert. *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*. Cultural Front. (New York: New York University Press, 2006)
- Muñoz, José Esteban. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. (Minneapolis: MN: U of Minnesota P, 1999).
- Patsavas, Alyson. "Recovering a Cripistemology of Pain: Leaky Bodies, Connective Tissue, and Feeling Discourse." *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 8, no. 2 (January 2014): 203–18.  
<https://doi.org/10.3828/jlcds.2014.16>.
- "Social Model of Disability." Mental Health Foundation, August 25, 2016. Accessed March 29 2019.  
<https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/learning-disabilities/a-to-z/s/social-model-disability>.
- Transport For London. "Transport for London Conditions of Carriage-Bus and Underground Services," 1990. Accessed February 22 2019.  
<http://content.tfl.gov.uk/tfl-conditions-of-carriage.pdf>.