The Performance of Disability

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A wheelchair, a crutch, a white stick, a stutter: all are signholders of disability that can be and are referenced by nondisabled people when they “act” disabled. To many disabled people, these “performances of disability” are offensive: they often poke fun at a disability or show underlying aggression or fear.

Even supposedly educative disability simulations are problematic. In these exercises, nondisabled people get to wheel around in a wheelchair for an hour, or are blindfolded. These performances of disability show more about nondisabled differently-adapted bodies than about the “real” situation of an experienced wheelchair user, or a visually impaired person navigating her world. Instead of bringing a wheelchair user’s or a blind person’s life nearer and showing

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it as a dignified life full of potential and specialized skills, many simulation exercises merely reinforce negative stereotypes of disabled people as victims. These simulations provide experiential evidence that being a “real” disabled person means being every day in the frustrating position that a nondisabled person first using a chair or being blindfolded usually experiences when faced with a steep ramp, with nonautomatic doors, or with insufficient audio or textural clues to her world.

A different kind of performance of disability dominates Hollywood and other national cinemas enamored with nondisabled actors performing disability. Oscars are bestowed on actors who play these roles: for example, Jane Wyman for *Johnny Belinda* (1948), Patty Duke for *The Miracle Worker* (1962), and Dustin Hoffman for *Rain Man* (1988). Tom Hanks won his back-to-back Oscars playing disabled people—for *Philadelphia* in 1993 and *Forrest Gump* in 1994. Russell Crowe was nominated but failed to win for *A Beautiful Mind* in 2001. The industry clearly admires the skill it takes to change bodily, transform at will, and to portray a way of being that is so strongly associated with the opposite of skill, choice, and ability, underlining the freedom of the nondisabled actor. Disability (often played as tragic, confining, and negative) is a foil to narratives of nondisabled achievement.

However, when nondisabled people don disability paraphernalia or masquerade as disabled, the results rarely offer interesting insights to disability scholars looking for resistances to dominant images of disability. Nondisabled people rarely work with the exciting sensual aspects of wheelchair use familiar to disabled performers, for instance the smooth and graceful curve that is impossible to achieve by bipedals, or the full-movement range of wheelchair athleticism (for more on the performances of disability by disabled people, see Kuppers 2003). Here I address this thorny area of nondisabled performances of disability by focusing on the rhetorical use of the wheelchair: on how wheelchairs become icons and communicative symbols in nondisabled performances. As a longtime wheelchair, crutch, and cane user, I know the sensuous and choreographic potential of chairs and other mobility paraphernalia onstage, but as a disability-culture activist and scholar, I am also aware of the negative stereotypes and narrative shortcuts a chair often provides. I want to tease out the complex ways in which wheelchairs and the performances that surround them function as meaning makers.

In *Murderball* (2005), a documentary about wheelchair-using athletes, one scene focuses on a wheelchair as material artifact, tool, and sign of freedom, sexiness, and regained masculinity-machismo. One of the protagonists of the film, disabled after a car accident, encounters one of the professional murderball athletes visiting hospitals for outreach purposes. As soon as the young man sees the competition chair, he desires it; at the end of the scene, he is sitting in it against the advice of the hospital personnel. He clearly relishes the quick cornering and handling of the machine. The chair in question is lovingly portrayed by the camera. Throughout the film, the camera focuses on welds and nuts, and on the many battle scars these customized sport chairs have received. *Murderball* is disability performance by disabled people: people to whom the chair is not just a narrative, but a tool, a lived experience, an aesthetic statement, and a form of self-identification.

The scenes celebrating the materiality of the chair engaged me most. For many but not all wheelchair users the chair is an extension of their selves. Informal conversations with chair users bear out the importance of the chair’s adornment and the acknowledgement of its status as a fashion accessory. For many users, frame colors, wheel decorations, and even the grunge look of heavy use are issues of aesthetics and self-definition going far beyond usability. Clearly, the wheelchair has rhetorical value in disability circles. This multivalence of potential readings of the chair in itself and of chair use and the narratives attached to specific chairs extends to the nondisabled world.

*Figure 1. (facing page) Scott Hogsett (right) with unnamed player in Murderball, THINKFilm, 2005. (Courtesy of THINKFilm)*
In *The Museum of Fetishized Identities* (2000) Guillermo Gómez-Peña, a nondisabled performer, uses disability as (one of many) textual elements to investigate complex issues surrounding race and fantasy. I saw *Museum* in September 2000 at Penn State University. Gómez-Peña and his collaborators created a fantastical environment, assembling a range of characters who are hybrids of Anglo fantasies of Latino identities. The characters filled a gallery, they arrayed themselves like exhibits, and the performance consisted of displays, small actions, and audience engagements, but without a coherent conventional narrative. As the title promised, the performance was a museum display staged as living tableaux.

One of the creatures on display was the El Mex Terminator (performed by Gómez-Peña) sitting in a manual wheelchair, dressed in *Rocky Horror Picture Show* transvestite paraphernalia, and smoking too many Marlboros. El Mex's bodily demeanor included twitching and various spastic movements, repeated and aimless. As part of the evening-long performance, spectators performed tasks for him and his fellow performers, including various “caring” rituals. A woman fed El Mex a banana; another took off his heavy boots and replaced them with sexy pumps. Moving from static display to audience interaction, El Mex involved everybody in the processes of meaning making. In his book *Ethno-Techno* (2005), Gómez-Peña writes that he dreams about being on permanent display in a natural history museum (echoing his iconic performance with Coco Fusco in *The Couple in the Cage* [also titled *Two Amerindians Visit the West*, 1992]; see for example Taylor 1998). Gómez-Peña describes the moment in his dream of being touched, clothed, and fed “a drag, an ethnographic shame” (42). The encounter Gómez-Peña dreams, as well as what *Museum* shows, is ruled by too many scripts about stages, postcolonial histories, and the functions of museums to be anything but a contact fantasy. The chair becomes the vehicle for this contact: the “inferior” locus of the “Native” (in his chair) in relation to the colonizer and the ethnologist (who are mobile). And the chair also represents the contact of metal and flesh, remembering other encounters—bullets in flesh, bombs, the hardware of warfare and warfare’s aftermath, the veteran’s paraphernalia. Immobility and wounding are the stereotypes of disability carried by the chair.

Gómez-Peña is interested in exploring fantasies and cultural stereotypes, in particular Anglo visions, desires, and fears of Latino/Latina embodiments. In the figure of El Mex Terminator, a number of these fantasies coalesce, exposing configurations of difference ordered around a figure of disability. But this hybrid figure in a wheelchair is only one nodal point of cultural meaning in a whole gallery full of costumed configurations of embodied semiotics. Trying to find their way past the displays, spectators instead find themselves performing in a strange ritual.

In *Museum*, disability aligns easily with various forms and fantasies of difference: for Gómez-Peña, redeploying a wheelchair-using character as herald of difference is a “natural” step, given the dominant significations in popular culture of disabled characters as secondary or weak. The wheelchair operates as a sign of “other than the norm” aligning itself with the Latino in opposition to the Anglo “norm.” Disability studies scholar Rosemarie Garland Thompson notes that one of the reasons African American writers mobilize disability so effectively in their writing is that they can be open to “alternative, affirmative narratives that do not depend on a faith in oneness or a range of valued concepts such as wholeness, purity, autonomy, and boundedness” (1997:113). Disalignment and intersection (rather than unity and closure) are core principles in Gómez-Peña’s “experimental cartography” of a postcolonial world (2005:21).

In his mobilization of the wheelchair, Gómez-Peña brings together two contradictory images that merge, leaving spectators with a sense of cultural unease: the independent and strong tough guy and the wheelchair user. Paul Longmore and Lauri Umansky write: “Americans often perceive disability—and therefore people with disabilities—as embodying that which Americans fear most: loss of independence, of autonomy, of control; in other words, subjection to fate” (2001:7).

The disabled players of *Murderball*, only too well aware of these narratives of disability, use their customized and aggressively wielded chairs as retooled macho symbols. The nondisabled
Gómez-Peña weaves together the threat of disability (with its historical association of feminization), the machismo of wrestlers, and Arnold Schwarzenegger’s Terminator with the equally culturally marked “feminizing” and “overwhelming” Mexican immigrants; both the disability and the immigrant status are markers of a loss of (border) control for this border brujo.

Other connotations are at work in my reception of El Mex Terminator and his iconic gear. Every year, a grand motorcycle parade roars through Washington, DC. The parade is the traditional tool of war veterans to remind their country of its duty toward them. This public performance of communal spirit and political action includes disabled riders, and many of the attendees display “biker” fashion: leather garb, ponytails, heavy metal gear—all also worn by Gómez-Peña. The performers in the bike parade self-consciously display their vision of the US, while at the same time being experienced by “normal Americans” as alienating and frightening representatives of biker gangs, violence, dangerous masculinity, and social exclusion.

Gómez-Peña’s performance as El Mex Terminator draws together these connotations of danger and tragic victim, bikers and war, and, in his smoking of Marlboros, victim of US corporate culture as masculinity under siege.

Gómez-Peña creates a dense web of meaning that lays the ground for many different narratives: a rich semantic field through which the audience can construct their own pathways. But this field is too rich; it clogs the act of reading. Making a meaningful path through this room of signifiers, finding nuggets of meaning, wrestling with the “natural” abundance of connotations set up in the Anglo/Latino encounter, is not easy. Some spectators give up and just “take it in” without figuring out what it might mean to them.

Unlike most of the wheelchair-using icons of Murderball—which, for all their documentary reality, are screen images safely tucked into their own fictive universes, part of a reassuring and familiar narrative arc—Gómez-Peña’s performance allows spectators no space for retreat. The glass wall of the museum diorama is referenced: Gómez-Peña’s performance took place in a gallery, and the tableaux were set up in scenes reminiscent of an anthropology museum’s “re-creations” of the exotic Other. The anthropological gaze is made explicit in the piece’s title, The Museum of Fetishized Identities. But this museum is alive with real bodies breaking through the glass—a far cry from the odorless, clean, divorced organization of a “real” museum where colonial violence is coded into pristine, disinterested knowledge. This is the freakshow breaking into the museum, the older memories of live displays at fairs smudging the borderline between disinterest and spectacle. Gómez-Peña’s spectacle is made from the detritus of this “real” (modern) museum, out of the waste that emerges as an art practice that rejects distance (Stam 1999:63).

If the anthropology museum is invested in the anonymous object—a representant of a “culture” that is silent in regard to its own life, its own individuality, and the specific history of its abduction—Museum disrupts abstraction, locating the heart of its performance in the
encounter of individual performers and individual audience members. Gómez-Peña’s presence in a wheelchair makes the transmission of knowledge uncomfortably visible—including the knowledge of Anglo-Latino relations and disabled people’s fight for civil rights.

In Gómez-Peña’s performance, the wheelchair blatantly projects its meaning making, its rhetorical value, its status as argument—and not just because Gómez-Peña can get up from it. The wheelchair’s cultural history of “suffering” collides with Gómez-Peña’s unsuffering live presence, a man in his wheelchair but in control and clearly having fun.

Just as Gómez-Peña exposes colonial knowledge as a fantasy machine designed to isolate and contain difference, the rhetorical use of the wheelchair as a reference for disability shows its sisterhood to these postcolonial practices. Like many of Gómez-Peña’s props (gas masks, whips, machine guns, cyborg utensils, high-heeled shoes, crosses, angels, etc.), this standard-hospital-issue wheelchair projects its own history of structural power, made manifest in living people. And with this, Gómez-Peña’s performance embodies too much difference, too much pain on too many levels, to be easily subsumed into the clarity of a museum display.

Gómez-Peña addresses political structures and historical inequalities. He materializes the fantasies we have of one another, making them uncomfortably present. Some audience members walk out of Gómez-Peña’s performances offended by his heightened stereotypes, including the maladjusted, sexually deviant cripple. Gómez-Peña insists on making viewers confront these matters, rather than transforming and dissolving them into conventional “positive images.” He stages fantasies of Latino/Anglo encounters that display mis/understandings between Anglos and Latinos. In *The Museum of Fetishized Identities* the wheelchair no longer means tragic immobility but instead stands for the paralyzing effects of colonizing fantasies. Given the strong semantic vitality of disability as a concept, Gómez-Peña can use the wheelchair to point to complex emotional issues surrounding the location of masculinity in Latino/Anglo encounters, and to the effects of colonial imaginations. Gómez-Peña’s live presence, together with the tactile, object-character of the wheelchair on his gallery stage, denies the possibility of any single reading of disability’s presence. Disability signifies, and at the heart of its signification is loss—including culture’s loss of how to deal with difference.

A different kind of postcolonial paralysis is enacted in the *X-Men* movies (2001, 2003, and 2006) by the sleek metal (and sometimes glass) wheelchair of telepathic Charles Xavier (played by Patrick Stewart), the head of a Mutant/Superhero enclave. In the X-Men universe originally created by Marvel comics in the 1960s, mutants are humans who are born with latent superhuman abilities that emerge at puberty. The X-Men are hybrids; they have to learn to live both as human adults and mutants. As “Homo Sapiens Superior” (their fictive scientific classification), the X-Men are discriminated against by normal humans who fear the mutants’ power. The storylines of the X-Men films revolve around how the mutants fight discrimination and build group solidarity. With this, the films echo the paths of many minority identity movements, including disability culture’s development.

Professor Xavier is the voice of rationality and moderation arguing for the peaceful coexistence of humans and mutants. His enemy is his one-time friend and chess opponent, Eric Lehnsherr, or Magneto (played by Ian McKellen), a tragic antihero. Magneto, a concentration camp survivor radicalized by his experiences of oppression, believes that humans and mutants cannot coexist.

Xavier’s wheelchair is part of a stylish and stylized world into which the cinema viewer is inducted long before she enters the cinema. The publicity posters and advertisements all focus on a metal X, a logo that denotes both imprisonment, finality, and futurity. The X also references the spokes of Xavier’s wheelchairs, which are sometimes made of hard glistening steel, sometimes made of clear, clean, lightweight, unbreakable glass or plastic. The physical qualities of steel versus glass/plastic drive the narrative: Magneto can magnetize metals, transforming everyday environments into deathtraps. To counteract Magneto, glass or plastic are necessary.
nonmagnetizable materials. In the final shots of the first film, Magneto is imprisoned in clear plastic. Xavier safely visits him by using a gorgeous glass wheelchair.

But Xavier also owns a smooth and curvy steel wheelchair. The first glimpse of this steel chair is a low angle camera shot of the wheel of the chair as Xavier rolls into the field of vision. Stretching out to the right of the screen is a curved metal and glass walkway, the curve echoing the circle of the wheel. Geometry and balance are indicators of Xavier’s modesty, calm, and balanced approach.

The architecture of the Mutant headquarters also sets the scene for Xavier’s performance of disability. The camera finds Xavier behind an ornate desk in a “tasteful” study, surrounded by young people who, after receiving a tutorial from their teacher, are dismissed to go and think about “definitions of weak and strong.” Set behind the desk, the wheelchair looks like an executive’s chair, complementing Xavier’s dark blue business suit.

While Gómez-Peña’s wheelchair performance generates a superabundance of signifiers, Xavier’s wheelchair performance presents an orderly man/machine hybrid, a being who creates his own environment as an extension of his telepathic mind. Gómez-Peña writes that, “Performance is not about presence, not representation; it is not (as classical theories of theatre would suggest) a mirror, but the actual moment in which the mirror is shattered” (2000:9). The image of the shattering mirror captures some of the violence, the unruliness, and the multiplicity this spectator experienced when meandering through his strange museum. In Xavier’s wheelchair world, surfaces remain intact, borders are vehemently policed and breached; most of the X-Men narratives involve the penetration of fortresses and unescapable prisons. A core moment of defeat in the first X-Men movie features a nonmutant politician who has been mutated by evil Magneto and whose demise consists of his liquification (a moment much discussed in the film’s reviews for its use of computer graphics). The scene shows the loss of boundaries in a fearful and horrific death. This literal dissolving of inner and outer boundaries occurs in other places in the film’s narrative. X-Men mutations often first become apparent in a character’s life at moments of sexual passion during puberty. In the films, sexual penetration of self- or body-boundaries are problematic zones. At the borders of bodies, people die and freak out, the world changes, evaporizes, mutates.

In this fictional universe, Xavier’s clear, clean, British upperclassness is an icon of the X-Men’s rationality and humanity. Patrick Stewart’s Xavier is the counterpoint to the dissolution and lack of boundaries that characterize the postcolonial hybrid (whether “creolized,” “carnivalesque,” or “nomadic”). Even Xavier’s “immobility” in the wheelchair is part of his rational, mind-focused universe where bodies are troublesome. In his wheelchair, Xavier is deeply reserved and contained, with a complete economy of movement. At the same time, there is no indication that (the performance of) impairment is at the heart of this immobility: at many moments in the films, Xavier uses his hands, his shoulders, his back. Indeed, in one scene Xavier leans forward in a way that can only be achieved with a tensing of leg muscles. Like Gómez-Peña’s use of the chair as a rhetorical tool, rather than as a naturalistic mimetic device, Xavier’s disability is signified rather than convincingly acted, although it seems highly doubtful to me that this distance between role and character is a consciously chosen alienation device.

Interestingly, the X-Men films have received positive responses from the disability community. In the journal New Mobility, Jeff Shannon writes:

The casual, nonjudgmental depiction of disability has grown increasingly common in roles ranging from superheroes to street punks. Patrick Stewart leads the X-Men (2000) from his futuristic wheelchair, heroically promoting the acceptance of outcasts; Ricardo Montalban pilots a helicopter wheelchair in Spy Kids 2: The Island of Lost Dreams (2002); and in the super-powered thriller Unbreakable (2000), Samuel L. Jackson’s use of a wheelchair (due to osteogenesis imperfecta) is merely an extension of his intensely enigmatic character. […] In each case, disability is merely an accepted fact of life, liberated from the stigma of stereotype. (2003)
I disagree. On the contrary, Xavier (as well as many of the other characters Shannon discusses) is a careful construction in which the wheelchair is used as a rhetorical sign-complex. I agree that the characters Shannon mentions are significant developments from the older wheelchair = villain, repressed homicidal maniac, bitter baddie stereotype that used to rule Hollywood representations. But in the highly systematic and formulaic narrative of the X-Men, Xavier is bound by the wheelchair he uses: contained, restrained, smooth, metallic or plastic. The wheelchair establishes a relationship with Xavier’s nemesis, the highly mobile Magneto, who embodies transgression. Magneto escapes, draws metal to him, sucks blood out of a man’s body (in X-2), wishes constantly to expand his sphere of influence, and generally leaves havoc in his wake. Where Xavier is contained, Magneto is expansive. Xavier’s movement vocabulary is small, Magneto’s uses sweeping gestures. The two characters make a pair, and the wheelchair, as a symbol of restraint and order, shiny containment, functions to keep them in a tense balance.

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1. There are other balances in this setup, too. Ian McKellen is an openly gay actor, and gay liberation and homophobia are another set of social lenses through which the films make sense. For a reading of the third X-Men movie, X-Men: The Last Stand, which appeared after this article was written, and which offers a slightly different perspective on disability and the wheelchair, see also Robert McRuer’s review in The Ragged Edge (2006). In the third movie, a “cure” is introduced into the narrative: mutants can now be cured (a storyline that chimes both with public disability discourses, where a search for the magical cure often overshadows access issues and accommodation; and with gay history and the notion of a cure for homosexuality. The core wheelchair image of the third film is the empty wheelchair after Xavier’s demise: the sadness of that image undoes for me many of the sexy, sleek images the first two films offered, and falls back into much more conventional disability = tragedy notions.
In a nuanced and extended review of the second X-Men movie, X-2: X-Men United, in Disability Studies Quarterly, disability scholar Michael Chemers draws attention to the narrative frame that feels so empowering to disability culture members:

I shouted, “You go, girl! Crips strike back!” in the theatre, which earned some weird looks. But the enthusiasm and the affirmative message of the film are contagious, providing a disability-positive aesthetic paradigm that borders on the liberation of the “abnormal” body envisioned in the writings of Mikhail Bakhtin. It showcases mutation as the key to human survival, and posits “birth defects” as markers of a leap forward in evolution, that we, in the fog of politics and other social constructions, cannot properly discern. Mutation is a natural phenomenon, which even eugenicists admit is key to our survival as a species, and yet, the film suggests, mutation is only as frightening, socially destabilizing, or hideous as it is interpreted to be. It is a glyph seeking a hierophant. In Mitchell and Snyder's words, “mutancy can be beautiful.” (2004)

Xavier is part of the Xavier-Magneto binary within the X-Men universe. And this is the problem I see with overly optimistic readings of the X-Men world. Chemers rightfully draws attention to the rhetorics of difference as they are discussed within the film’s universe. But the structure of this universe, and of the film, gives few openings for difference. Instead, smoothness, both of steel and glass, is the overarching metaphor of the X-Men.

That smoothness also affects the narrative. There are no alienation devices here, no conscious play with excess. Gómez-Peña’s re-creation of an anthropological museum can act as a discomforting contact zone precisely because the location of the museum is already overdetermined, already baroque. But the cinematic steel and glass in X-Men have none of this citational quality: they are “straight,” and tongue-in-cheek only in relation to the bodily violence that is derived from the comic strip of X-Men’s origins. The excesses provided by the Hollywood machine, the special effects, the citational campness of the comic strip, allow for some distance, but do not necessarily comment on the use of cultural symbols such as the wheelchair. But as an active audience member, I can go and play.

For yet, with all that straightness... I too can feel Chemers’s elation at the exploits of disabled bodies, cast narrationally as “underdogs.” They are offered as points of identification, battling it out against the boring mediocrity of “normates” (to use Rosemarie Garland Thomson’s term [1997:8]). There’s a superstar in a sexy wheelchair up there on the screen. This form of casting is too rare to ignore. Something about seeing a stylish chair up there on the screen is deeply satisfying.

In the wheelchair performances I’ve discussed, different kinds of pleasures are activated. One is the ambivalent, disorienting pleasure of performance, finding oneself surrounded by the fragmenting mirrors of a funhouse. And the other is the fun of a grand Hollywood narrative that invites me to become “the freak.” The two pleasures do not cancel each other out, nor are they medium specific: I can turn them around. Thus I can create mini-narratives around the characters populating the Museum of Fetishized Identities. And the narrative-halting force of complex and drawn-out special effects in the X-Men movies threatens many times to overwhelm the neat categories of containment and excess, boundary and danger that characterize the X-Men universe. But how wheelchairs function within each of these pleasures, narratives, and audience responses is different, and impacts differently. In Gomez-Pena the wheelchair is a force of explosive fracture and cracked narratives; in X-Men the chair is a force of containment, rolling away on stunningly smooth surfaces.

But the power of wheelchair performances for disabled people like myself goes beyond the rational dissection of performance texts. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick wrote, queerness can rest in the ability to attach intently to a few cultural objects, objects of high or popular culture or both, objects whose meaning seemed mysterious, excessive or oblique in relation to the codes most readily available to us, [which] became a prime resource for survival. We
needed for there to be sites where meanings didn’t line up tidily with each other, and we learn to invest sites with fascination and love. (1993:3)

The wheelchair can be such a site. In the X-Men, the icon of disability conveys pleasure by its very visibility. It provides a code outside the code, the trigger that initiates Michael Chemer’s call and that provided the lens for my own experience of Gómez-Peña’s Museum. For some of us members of disability culture, the wheelchair is a cherished cultural object invested with a fascination well beyond what narration or function might warrant. As “real” objects wheelchairs are transporters full of weight, texture, and sensation. On stage and screen, wheelchairs become rhetorical devices carrying narratives and marking identities. An attention to the rhetoric of the wheelchair-object can make a spectacle of difference.

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