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## Disrupting Ableism: Performance Poetry and the Disabled

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**Abstract:** Performance Poetry is the term used to describe poems created especially for live performance, frequently in collaborative or multimedia settings that incorporate dance, music, or the visual arts. It serves as an alternative space for the marginalised sections of society who are often sidelined by mainstream media. They find their voice both in form and content through the sound, movements, emotions and silences of the performer. Performance poetry serves as a means for people with disabilities to challenge normative views and dispel the disability myths and misconceptions. Performers express their lived experiences in unique ways. The disabled body and mind are not a limitation but a source of immense creativity. Artists integrate sign language, dance, music and props in their performance, fostering a disability culture. This paper analyses how Performance Poetry challenges ableism and helps disabled communities to assert their identity.

**Keywords:** *Disability Studies, Performance Poetry, Stigmas, Self Expression, Inclusivity, Ableism*

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## Introduction

Performance Poetry is the poetry whose scope exceeds the page. It refers to spoken, recorded, or multimedia-based poetry that exists outside of traditional print, whose production and perception are performative. It is distinctive in its physical, theatrical and vocal manifestations, often integrating various media such as dance, music and drama. Spoken word, oral tale or ballad, dramatic, slam, hip-hop, embodied, signed, sound, or enacted poetry are some of the styles that make up Performance poetry (*Performance Poetry – Literary Theory and Criticism*). Performance poetry is considered authentic and unvarnished, with the performer using their physicality as a means of communication, in contrast to conventional mass media like radio and television, which emphasize perfection in appearance and sound.

The paper opts for the term ‘disabled’ to refer to people with mental, sensory and functional limitations. The most commonly used term “differently abled” might be well-intentional, but it is often seen as a patronising term by the disabled communities that cancels their lived realities. It is viewed as a condescending euphemism and is rejected by the disabled. The term ‘Divyang’ (translated as ‘the one with a divine body’), used by the Indian Government to replace ‘vikalang’, has faced significant criticism from the disabled communities. It was termed as ‘controversial’ by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) (*‘Divyangjan’ Is a Controversial Word Similar to ‘Mentally Ill’, Says U.N. Body - The Hindu*). Disability Rights Activists reject the romanticisation of their condition and ask for systemic changes. They demand that the community's actual issues be addressed.

Ableism is the prejudice and discrimination against individuals with physical or mental disabilities. Ableism classifies people based on their disability and views the disabled as inferior to non-disabled people (Linton). Disability becomes a tool for oppression rather than a physical impairment. The idea of ableism has even led to the cruellest chapters of human history, like the systematic state-sponsored murder of disabled people in Nazi Germany. The patronising desire to ‘cure’ the disabled emerges from the idea of ableism. The idea is intertwined in our culture, perpetuated through folklore and classics. The disabled are either portrayed as super-abled (like the blind prophet Tiresias, who sees the truth), naïve (as Tiny Tim in *A Christmas Carol*), or villainous, evil monsters (such as Captain Hook in *Peter Pan*). The disabled are devalued systematically, reducing them to plot devices, tropes or stereotypes. In a 1992 report published by the British Council of Organisation of Disabled People, Colin Barnes observes the most common and damaging stereotypes of disability found in literature, television, music and films (Barnes). The stereotypes examined by Barnes are:

- a) Pitiable and pathetic
- b) Object of violence
- c) Sinister and/or evil
- d) Atmosphere/background character
- e) Supercrip
- f) Laughable/ laughed at
- g) Their own (and only) worst enemy
- h) A burden
- i) Asexual (sic.), not interested in/object of romantic or sexual feelings
- j) Incapable of social participation (Barnes)

This social (mis)representation becomes a shared system of knowledge, and there is a striking contrast between the idea of perfection and disability. The exclusion and misrepresentation of disability stems from the lack of authority in narratives. Saleebey, while discussing the intersection of narratives and power, writes that “the building blocks of meaning are found in the edifice of culture”(Saleebey 299).He emphasises the significance of artistic expression, especially for the disadvantaged sections of society. Saleebey writes:

Groups who suffer the domination of broader social institutions or their own cultural devices under the dominant culture frequently do not have their stories told or heard ... one of the characteristics of being oppressed is having one’s stories buried under the forces of ignorance and stereotype (Saleebey 301).

The distinctive characteristics of Performance Poetry make it a suitable medium for the disabled to express themselves. Several studies have already been conducted on disability culture and the artistic possibilities offered by Performance Poetry. But there is a research gap in understanding how disability culture uses performance poetry.

Performance Poetry becomes a political medium and artistic tool for the disabled, testifying Marshal McLuhan’s idea that “the medium is the message”(McLuhan 7). This study aims to examine how Performance Poetry serves as an alternative space for communal gathering and identity formation for the disabled. The paper will examine how Performance Poetry is performative, focusing on how it produces social reality rather than describing it. Performance Poetry gives disabled people who would otherwise be marginalized, the agency to speak for themselves. The performer conveys their emotional

turmoil through their intonation, which occasionally includes non-melodic elements, gestures, body language, etc. The venue serves as a social gathering spot because of the eye contact and shared enthusiasm, particularly during slam poetry. Performance Poetry adapts the spontaneity of the oral traditions, making each performance a novel experience for the audience.

The paper examines how the ideas of crip aesthetics and relational aesthetics work in Performance Poetry by taking random performance pieces by disabled individuals. The artistic, cultural, and political movement known as "crip aesthetics" is based on the experiences of people with disabilities and questions accepted ideas of normalcy, functionality, and beauty. By emphasizing the physical and social experiences of disability, it celebrates "crip" (reclaimed from "cripple") identity and frequently uses nontraditional forms to encourage inclusivity and combat ableism identity (Millett-Gallant). Relational Aesthetics highlights the 'collaborative social space' in which the audience and performer interact, transforming them into 'co-performers' of the piece. The paper also analyses the embodied language that works in Performance Poetry, which makes it an accessible medium.

### **Disability Studies and Disability Culture**

Early in the 1980s, social movements for disabled persons in the US and the UK gave rise to the interdisciplinary discipline of Disability Studies. Disability Studies explores the chronological shifts in attitude towards disabledness, focusing on its representation in literature, media, and art.. Ann Millett Gallant observes Disability Studies as the "Cultural Studies of the body", and "studies how the body may serve as a site, target, and vehicle for ideology and creative expression (Gallant 06). At first, the representation of disability was symbolic or metaphorical, but when disabled people began to express themselves, their actual experiences began to take center stage. Disability is gradually being seen as an aspect of human diversity rather than as something regrettable. Disability Culture is seen as social and political by Disability Studies. There, cultural manifestations were incorporated into the continuous endeavour of disabled individuals to achieve solidarity and self-esteem. Finkelstein, in his writing about the inclusion of disabled people in mainstream society, claims that disability is a social relationship, not a personal misfortune:

If disability is viewed as a paradoxical situation involving the state of the individual (his or her impairment) and the state of society (the social restrictions which are imposed on an individual) then attitudes may be directed towards either, or both, of these aspects. Attitudes may be held towards the individual who is impaired or towards the social barriers (Finkelstein 5).

According to Finkelstein, there are three historical phases in the understanding of disability. (Finkelstein) . In the first stage, people with physical disabilities were assimilated into society, but they were frequently marginalized as members of the lower socioeconomic classes. In the second phase, industrialization and medical developments further institutionalized and segregated the disabled

individuals. People with physical disabilities were forced into institutional spaces like hospitals and asylums since it was considered a personal tragedy. This reinforced cultural ideals of able-bodied superiority and created their dependency on others. A shift in viewpoint that recognizes disability as a social construct happened during the third phase. To facilitate the reintegration of individuals with disabilities into society at large, Disability Culture focuses on lowering social and environmental barriers. The third phase concentrates on fostering equality and inclusion. Chun-shan Yi and Catherine Hyland Moon argue that a disability-affirming strategy based on Critical Disability Studies should replace medical deficit models in art therapy. This shift to the social model of disability encourages community bonding and drives the Disability Culture. Yi and Moon write:

The need to bond over shared experiences—such as being subjected to stereotypes, possessing knowledge about pain mitigation, managing microaggression, and developing resilience and resistance against ableism—continues to drive the formation of Disability Culture. However, the stigma and shame associated with disability and the pressure to *overcome* have caused many disabled people to maintain their distance from those who identify as disabled; still others may not associate their impairment or illness with disability (Yi and Moon 59).

The medical model views disability as a “corporeal problem” and works to “cure, fix or eliminate” it. Social model counters the ideology of change proposed by the medical model and differentiates disability as a “socially constructed identity”. The range of impairments and experiences is so varied that the objective medical language often fails to acknowledge the subjective experiences of the disabled.

*Disability Arts* plays a crucial role in addressing the paradoxical situation of disability. Disability Arts refers to any creative form that uses disability as a theme or background. It emerged from the Disability Rights Movement and the larger struggle of disabled people for equality and the right to participate in all aspects of life. *Disability in the Arts* is even more inclusive because, rather than making disability a major motif, *Disability in the Arts* emphasizes works of art that include disabled persons in their conception and development. Disabled individuals established their own area where their voices could be heard clearly because they were dissatisfied with being excluded from mainstream art. Crip poetry views disability as “a social construction and rejects public perception of disability as a shameful, pitiable, tragic and individual phenomenon” (*Interview with Jim Ferris – Wordgathering*).

People with disabilities develop a collective identity through their shared experience of oppression and resilience. Above all, they accept and embrace their impairment with dignity. This is what Steve Brown defines as Disability Culture. (*Definitions of Disability Culture | Disability Cultural Center | University of Illinois Chicago*). From being the receptors of dominant patronising narratives, the

disabled reclaim their agency, turning the discourse from how they are treated to what they create. Disability Poetics is a form of survival poetry that defies convention. In a world that values ability, disabled bodies and minds are labelled as deviant from norms and customs. Disabled writers can challenge the normalized 'body' of the poetry on the page (Heffers 56).

Performance Poetry becomes a suitable medium for showcasing Disability Culture, taking Disability Poetry from the page to the stage. Moving beyond representation, Performance Poetry alters the way disability is viewed. It offers another way to express the experience of being neurodiverse or orally or visually challenged.

### **Performance Poetry and Disability Culture**

In Performance Poetry, the story is delivered in the first person, and the performer's presence on stage conveys far more than merely reading a poem and envisioning the poet's sentiments. It is a dynamic, accessible and spontaneous medium, a genre that serves justice to the marginalised. Heffers argues that the writer should look for new genres to represent the downtrodden. He writes:

When a writer is working from marginalised lived experiences, sometimes a writer will have to invent a 'genre ... most appropriate for the task', or at least use a genre that is rarely committed to the page. If art is, in any capacity, meant to convey human experiences, then by necessity, not all art can be the same. Every form, genre, and method cannot serve every artist, poet, or writer. When a poet is in tune with their own body and its rhythms as a necessity of living – acknowledging needs, honouring limits, sensing nuances from minute to minute – then that awareness can manifest in a poem itself (Heffers 56).

When the disabled individuals perform, their physical and mental hardships are intrinsically infused into the performance. By taking control of the stage, the performer reclaims agency of articulation and creates a sense of belonging, particularly through the interactive nature of Performance Poetry. More than words, the story is told through sensory displays and physicality. Performance Poetry thus embraces accessibility, dismantles exclusionary practices and uplifts the marginalised voices.

The flexibility of form is a significant feature in making Performance Poetry appropriate for disabled people. The combination of multimedia elements and technical breakthroughs creates new channels for articulation. Digital platforms help to transcend the physical constraints that limit mobility. The online poetry groups and slam poetry competitions make previously inaccessible platforms open to the disabled. Groups like 'Powerful Poets' foster a sense of community and visibility, thereby helping facilitate social change. This group is a leading voluntary sector organisation in Brent, a group that offers a unique space where people with learning disabilities can express themselves through poetry.

They compose poems about subjects that are relevant to them. Every poet has the opportunity to express their tale uniquely.

Poetry defamiliarizes not only language but the body normalized within language (Davidson). The self-reliance and dignity these channels provide are unparalleled when compared with the perforated nature of mainstream media. The self awareness serve to boost their sense of dignity. Expressing oneself is also a therapeutic practice for disabled people. This is accomplished by a decentralization process in which the poetry's mnemonic mechanisms convey the feelings of marginalized groups' actual experiences. Performance Poetry features mnemonic devices; techniques rooted in oral tradition that aid memory without the help of written texts. For the disabled, the abstract ideas are turned into visible presentations through gestures, rhythms, pauses, and omissions. Thus, the performance is a form of resilience for them.

### **The Empowering Act of Performance**

Performance Poetry is both participatory and emancipatory. Many young people with disabilities have had their identity established by the 'other'. The media might call them 'inspirational', schools may label them 'children with special needs', or doctors may use medical terms to define them. But in a performance done on stage, they reclaim their identity and narrative. This session would look at how the disabled artists utilize Performance Poetry to communicate their diverse experiences with neurodivergent difficulties, mental illness, and physical constraints. Some random spoken word performances are chosen as samples to demonstrate the medium's adaptability.

*Seen But Seldom Heard* is a project by Bournemouth University that advocates the need to accommodate disabled individuals in decision-making processes that impact their lives. In such projects, workshops are conducted in which participants co-create poems with researchers to question the hegemony (Hodges et al.). The participatory nature of the project makes it inclusive and enables youngsters to acquire new skills that help them question stereotypes and tell their own stories. From passive observers, the disabled individuals become active participants. This enables them to change the public perception of disability. The project includes video performances such as *If My Hand Could Leave My Body* by Sean, *Not a Vegetable* by Dave, and *Titanium Rod* by George (Seen But Seldom Heard | Performance Clips).

Performance poetry is used as a tool in an arts-based research approach (Hodges et al.). Unlike traditional research, where interviews or surveys function as primary tools, arts-based research employs art-making itself as a method of inquiry. In this context, the body becomes a research instrument, as participants contribute to the poem's "beat" through wheelchairs, breathing techniques, and assistive technologies. Although participants write individual poems, reciting them collectively produces a community of resistance, demonstrating that their struggles are socially produced rather

than merely personal medical conditions. Performance poetry thus becomes a liminal space that reveals the complexities of identities often overlooked by quantitative data.

The poem *“Why Do You Have a Stick”* by Shruthi Chopra provides a relevant example (“Spoken Word Poetry: ‘Why Do You Have a Stick?’ [CC] | Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome | Disability”). The performance explores, from the perspective of a person who uses a walking stick, the experience of living with a chronic illness, particularly Ehlers–Danlos Syndrome (EDS). It interrogates prevailing cultural attitudes, highlights personal struggles, and emphasizes the importance of understanding and empathy toward people with disabilities.

In Deaf culture and Disability Studies, ASL poetry is viewed as a "visual literature" that creates meaning through handshapes, spatial movement, and facial expressions rather than sound. The repetitive movements of hands and body parts create a rhythm, and the body itself is used to represent various characters and transitions in the story. Clayton Valli, Ella Mae Lentz and Ian Sanborn are some of the key figures known for incorporating rhymes and hand movements in their works.

By offering a controlled yet adaptable medium that complements autistic cognitive and sensory strengths—such as an emphasis on pattern, rhythm, and direct communication—Performance Poetry supports autistic people in expressing themselves. For people who are non-speaking or have severe communication obstacles, it provides a safe, nonjudgmental environment in which they can manage complex emotions, avoid the anxieties of in-person social engagement, and regain their voice. Poems of Aravind Nandakumar is a perfect example (Arvind Nandakumar - *“That’s Just Your Autism Speaking”* (Button Live) - Button Poetry). His Performance Poetry offers a potent critique of the dominant narrative around autism, signifying the importance of treating autistic people as unique individuals with inherent worth rather than as problems that need to be resolved or fixed. It demands a shift from a fear-driven narrative to one that values, respects, and acknowledges neurodiversity. The speaker's voice captures the annoyance, tenacity, and dignity of people with autism.

*OCD* by Neil Hilborn is another Performance (Ocd by Neil Hilborn) that discusses romance from the perspective of someone suffering from Obsessive Compulsive Disorder; / *When you have Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, you don't really get quiet moments/. Even in bed, I'm thinking: Did I lock the doors? Yes/. Did I wash my hands? Yes./ Did I lock the doors? Yes/ Did I wash my hands? Yes./* (“Ocd by Neil Hilborn” 0:09-0:20). The narrative structure of question and answer, with significant pauses, conveys an extreme sense of suffering to the audience. His video in Button Poetry gathered a million views.

*Explaining My Depression to My Mother* by the Canadian Poet Sabrina Benaim is a viral Spoken Word Poem about the difficulties faced in communicating mental illness to a loved one. The work, which was first performed at the 2014 National Poetry Slam, quickly went viral on Button Poetry's YouTube

channel, garnering millions of viewers. Depression is described as a ‘shapeshifter’ (“ Sabrina Benaim - Explaining My Depression to My Mother ” 0:09-0:20). The performance criticises the common assumptions that depression is something one can snap out of. When the narrator is asked by her mother whether she is afraid to die, she responds “No, I am afraid of living” (“Sabrina Benaim - Explaining My Depression to My Mother” 2:17-2:25), indicating the level of anxiety and social pressure someone with depression has to deal with. She breaks down multiple times during the performance, her face reflecting her mental troubles and helplessness as she explains to someone how it feels to be depressed. Neither the listener nor the narrator understands what is being described. Performance Poetry becomes a powerful medium capable of expressing the intensity of her feelings. Hand gestures, pitch, and vocal cracks fill in the blanks in the performance, allowing the audience to connect with the artist right away.

Jim Ferris, who has a congenital leg impairment, is known for his *Hospital Poems*, in which he narrates the experience of being treated as a ‘biomedical model’ or ‘fixable object’ during his childhood. He questions the medical objectification and embraces the disabled identity in his poems. Petra Kuppers, in her essay, writes about the aspects of healing that Ferris’ poems provide for the community.

There are many people out there, alone in hospitals, and with memories of bodily differences and invasions, benevolent or not. Dealing with these experiences and memories is not easy, as Ofri’s review of *The Body in the Library: A Literary Anthology of Modern Medicine* testifies. But the poetry of crip culture, including Jim Ferris’s *The Hospital Poems*, can provide sophisticated companionship, can open spaces of agency, and can allow connection in anger as well as in healing (Petra Kuppers: “Jim Ferris: ‘The Hospital Poems’”).

## Conclusion

Performance Poetry offers opportunities for artistic interventions, and it departs from the rigid constraints that characterise conventional art forms. It serves as a medium for challenging the preconceived notions and stigmas associated with disability. Performance Poetry honours what is left out by the standard art forms; disability becomes a special instrument that helps to communicate with the audience. While performing, the disabled artists frequently rejects the social pressure to attain the ever-elusive "normality," instead finding meaning and strength inside disability experience, not in spite of disabilities but because of and through them. Thus, performance turns into an act of identity assertion and resistance.

According to Lydia X. Z. Brown, a person cannot be separated from their disability. She put forward the idea of identity-first language (e.g., "autistic person") over person-first language (e.g., "person with autism”) (Brown). She advocates that using person-first language may convey the idea that disability is

shameful. Performance Poetry embodies this inseparable relation and intersects with Identity First Language in creating its own narratives for the disabled.

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