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# Misfits in the Front of the Classroom: Poetic Narratives of Teaching with a Hidden Disability

## **Cover Page Footnote**

Nicole Eugene is a PhD candidate in the Health Communication track who researches hidden disability using qualitative and humanistic modes of inquiry. She received a B.A. from Spelman College in Sociology and Art and earned her M.A. in American Cultural Studies from Bowling Green State University. She would like to acknowledge the role Ben Bates and William K. Rawlins played in the preparation of the manuscript. Portions of this paper were presented/performed at the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry in 2016.

## Misfits in the Front of the Classroom: Poetic Narratives of Teaching with a Hidden Disability

Nicole Eugene

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*Instructors with a hidden disability may choose to talk with their students about their disability, they may choose to not talk about their disability, or they may negotiate their disability in ways that challenge the binary of showing/hiding. However a person experiences being an instructor with a hidden disability, their narratives concerning this choice will involve cultural values that reinforce their sense of belonging to the institution of higher education. In order to examine how graduate students negotiate their disabilities or illnesses in the classroom context, I conducted three interviews with graduate instructors addressing how they communicate their disabilities to their students. I perform excerpts of their disability narratives through using poetic transcription to highlight the cultural values that surfaced within each narrative—edutainment, practicality, and transparency. I then discuss the intersections of ableist structures and higher education while also encouraging future research projects to incorporate creative and imaginative understandings of what it means to be an instructor with a hidden disability.*

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Cultural critics are charged with the task of examining taken for granted assumptions and interrogating the cultural values supporting these assumptions. However, there are a number of challenges to uncovering the cultural values at work in any particular milieu. Narrative is one approach to examining these values. Narratives can reveal taken for granted assumptions about the body and health (Dutta, 2008). Furthermore, as Dutta explains, narratives demonstrate “the values and beliefs of a culture not only by looking at what is present but also by looking at those elements that are absent or background” (2008, p. 109). The ways in which people in a given community come to understand disability and health is intimately intertwined with the values, beliefs, and meanings that circulate in everyday life (Dutta, 2007, 2008; Dutta & Basu, 2008). Since cultural values are at work in the narratives of instructors with hidden disabilities, I decided to gather instructors’ stories about teaching with a hidden disability in order to examine the emergent cultural values. I then employ poetic transcription and present selected snapshots of the lived experience of being an instructor with a hidden disability. The poetic transcriptions from my participants’ narratives challenge simplistic binaries of showing versus hiding while also providing a rich account of the cultural values present in each narrative.

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The university plays a central role in establishing and reinforcing communication norms. One of the formal ways communication norms are put in place in academia is through the instructors who manage and enforce conventions of written and verbal communication. Instructors such as myself—that is, instructors with hidden disabilities—are just as responsible for establishing norms as any other instructor. The university is also a space where convergent and divergent ideas and practices invite students to wrestle with dominant norms by using some of the tools that higher education provides. These tools include classroom discussion, critical thinking, advocacy, and service learning. Thus, the university challenges norms while also relying on them, much like any other organization.

For people with disabilities, norms concerning which bodies and brains should be capable of what—as students, as instructors, as colleagues, as researchers—are particularly salient. The existence of unexamined assumptions about abilities and disabilities constitutes a major barrier for many in attaining an education, working at a university, or pursuing the opportunities such an institution may promote. Case in point, the laws requiring educators to provide accommodations for people with disabilities attest to the ways that educational practices rely on both implicit and explicit explanations concerning the physical, mental, and emotional capacities of the people that universities seek to serve and employ. The World Health Organization (2011) defines disability as an interaction between bodies in social and physical environments. Therefore, disability should be discussed with regard to the specific environmental contexts that are central to the interaction. This approach to disability—as an interaction between bodies and specific contexts—is an alternative to conceptualizations of disability as a static category. These interactions are multi-layered and unfold across both conscious and unconscious levels of awareness within the environments that pull people towards community. In order to create an account of disability that resists reductive categories, this paper employs poetry to highlight how people with hidden disabilities navigate the context of a college classroom as an instructor.

Accordingly, in the first part of this paper I focus on the university as a place where cultural norms are established and challenged, discursively. Affect theory informs the arguments and language of this piece because the university is a site where rich moments of affect unfold (Ahmed, 2012; Siomopoulos, 1977; Stewart, 2007). I also review how many persons with disabilities have turned to poetic forms of expression to communicate the experience of *misfitting*—being in a space or social context that does not match one’s physiological capabilities (Garland-Thomson, 2011). A misfit is a lived concept that seeks to defamiliarize the idea of disability while simultaneously articulating the experience in feminist materialist terms (Garland-Thomson, 2011). Later in this work I present such key moments from my interviews with university instructors with hidden disabilities using poetic transcription.

Each interview is rendered in this fashion to best illustrate the cultural values of higher education that emerged in each person's narrative. Sharing these instructors' words in poetic form both embodies and performs the interpretive work of my experiences as author, researcher, and colleague.

I begin by illustrating two scenes that reveal how cultural values circulating in higher education influence how people understand ability and disability. While walking on campus one day, I looked up at the crest of a building that I had passed countless times before. This time was different. I glanced up and noticed that the modest crest of this five-story building featured "OHIO VNIVERSITY" in stone. I continued on my path, until the irony of this sign stopped me in my tracks. Where is the "U" in university? Why is a "V" used instead of a "U"? I looked again and mused about this curious carving perched atop this noted building that was built in 1911 (Williams, 2015). I remembered the nineteenth-century books I had once held with the delicacy of a devoted bibliophile. Many of the gilt and hand-inlaid words appeared to be broken and misspelled to my modern eyes. Like many of those old books with old spellings, this building had also outlived its usefulness and was targeted for demolition. Spelling, grammar, fonts, and words are always evolving as this Latin V reminds me. In this way, the standardization of language sometimes casts otherwise "normal" people and "ordinary" texts as being abnormal. With this in mind, I was able to look at the word with a different set of sensibilities; the building and its carved letters were a relic of the pre-standardized era of education.

Next, I share another scene that exemplifies how performances of hidden disability unfold in higher education. One day a respected and tenured college professor told my class that he had dyslexia. Astonishingly, unlike anyone I had known with a learning disorder, he was neither ashamed nor afraid of potentially discrediting looks from his students. His body language and voice were unremarkable; it was as if he had simply told us that he was left-handed—as if it was a personal trait and not a disability. For the first time in my life, disability was disentangled from the permanence of stone and text. I slowly began to recognize the bravery of his disclosure. Here was a person responsible for overseeing how students use language; yet his own mastery of these very skills involved endless labor. His disclosure was much more than an act of privacy management—it created affect—revealing a complex relationship I had not considered previously between education and disability. Like me, he belongs to a tribe of misfits—people with bodies and minds that are placed outside of ideal bell curve quadrants. That day I saw that people who were different in silent ways could still excel in a university. This moment continues to affect my sense of belonging in academia. This memory also leads me to ask: how are universities places in which "misfits" feel simultaneously welcomed and unwelcomed?

I spent nearly a decade outside of academia before returning for my Ph.D. I returned with the standpoint of an outsider—I was able to perceive beliefs and

values that, for me, were once naturalized and unquestioned. My initial interest in interviewing fellow instructors rested on a desire to discover the “correct” way to go about being an instructor with a hidden disability. After conducting interviews with participants, I recognized that this was the wrong question to be asking. Moreover, my project was initially hampered by my own internalization of comparative approaches to evaluation, or the idea that comparison yields truly objective and fair assessments. The true problem resided in the trouble I was having in trying to imagine how other people with hidden disabilities navigate teaching. This is the chasm I hope to address in this research. The topic of disability is too often characterized by a shortfall of imagination and the subsequent surprise at how some people with disabilities continually surpass the low expectations set for them by the world. Meeting other people with hidden disabilities in academia, hearing their stories, and seeing myself in their words, eventually evolved into a practice that continually expands my imagination of what it means to be an educator. My interviewees taught me that there is no “correct” way to be an instructor with a hidden disability any more than there is any “correct” way to be an instructor.

While there is no shortage of research focused on college students with a range of impairments, the intersection of disability and higher education—from the perspective of instructors—is largely unexamined (McBride & Wahl, 2005). Moreover, the nuanced cultural dimensions of higher education and the subsequent cultural values they reinforce are also under-examined (Baglieri, Valle, Connor, & Gallagher, 2011; Feldman, 1976; Griffin, Bennett, & Harris, 2013; Gutiérrez y Muhs, 2012; Hayman, 1998; Trubek et al., 2003). The absence of critically reflexive research on academic culture feeds into a lacuna of knowledge about confluences of intersectional difference—race, gender, sexuality, age, and ability—which might otherwise operate to improve awareness about these disenfranchising patterns. Like the voices of the interviewees here, there are many people with hidden disabilities that hold positions of authority at universities. Despite their ostensible invisibility because of their ability to pass as able-bodied, instructors’ stories of what it means to work at a university reveal just how far the university has come since it first embraced hereditary conceptualizations of “intelligence” as innate (Gould, 1981; Hayman, 1998; Snyder & Mitchell, 2006). Participants’ stories also outline how far academia still needs to go in pursuit of the egalitarian ideals of equity, merit, and access in higher education.

People with hidden disabilities teach college students every day. Like my professor recalled above, many of them elect to tell their students about their disability, while others do not. Still others will find ways to communicate their needs outside of explicit disclosures. This research probes how the cultural values of higher education are a central part of how instructors with hidden disabilities situate their bodies within the classroom. Additionally, in sharing participants’ experiences via poetic transcription, I make explicit the often-implicit cultural values of edutainment, practicality, and transparency.

In order to explore these issues in greater depth, I conducted interviews with three graduate students that identify as having hidden disabilities, focusing on teaching, self-disclosure, and perceptions of stigma. In doing so, each interviewee explicitly discussed the performative nature of their role as an instructor without my asking them. The transcriptions were scrutinized to identify principal cultural values—the values that bind an individual to a community and help to clarify their role within a community. Then, in striving to retain the context of each interviewee’s narrative, I edited the transcriptions and rendered poignant passages in poetic form to highlight the cultural value identified. As such, each poem performs difference while simultaneously inviting the reader into the speaker’s world.

### **The Poetics of Disability**

Many people with disabilities use poetry as a critical medium of communication. Koppers (2007) views poetry as a mode of expression in disability culture. And this disability culture is inseparable from the shared oppression of ableism (Koppers, 2007). Naming one’s identity, performing everyday roles, shaping language, and claiming bodies are some of the ways that disability scholars draw attention to the tenuous relationship between persons with disabilities and the able-bodied community. Poetry is a form of verbal, textual, and visual expression through which poets depict nuanced relationships among conventions, power, and bodies. One of the earliest poems that used sign language poetry as a form of protest is Nack’s (2009) poem from 1827, “The Music of Beauty.” His poem features a Deaf person, like himself, who brings the poem to a close by saying “I pity those who think they pity me” (Nack, 2009, p. 26). Poetry allows writers like Nack to express themselves on and in their own terms. Accordingly, poetry can be a generative zone in which readers can access the standpoint of another.

Poetry is also a space where the idea of disability can be interrogated. Smith (1999, 2006), a professor of special education, uses poetry to perform the experience of communicating as a person with a learning disability. His poetry brings readers to a space where broken conventions flourish in order to remind readers that depth, character, comprehension, and humanity all exist despite learning disabilities that may obfuscate these traits (Smith, 1999, 2006). Ferris uses poetry to separate conceptualizations of the body from embodied ordeals like pain and suffering (Ferris, 2008). Clark, who identifies as a BlindDeaf man who grew up using American Sign Language, noticed that English poets were fond of demonizing blindness and deafness, so he uses poetry to protest the ableism of this marginalization (Bartlett, Clark, Ferris, & Weise, 2015). Furthermore, there are several poets that use spoken word—a performance-based form of poetry that incorporates word-play and storytelling in order to challenge ableism and stereotypes about disability (Ferris, 2008; Koppers, 2007).

However, poetry does not always engage disability in productive ways. In contrast to poetry of protest and resistance, disability poets have also noted the unabated proliferation of clichéd disability metaphors that communicate deficits like ignorance, turmoil, ineptitude, immobility, and death (Bartlett et al., 2015). Such simplifications of the lived experience of having a disability contribute to ongoing and problematic rhetoric that casts people with disabilities as abnormal and therefore in need of “fixing”—whether through medical technologies or social intervention (Bartlett et al., 2015). Alternately, metaphors of disability deployed as analytical categories for researchers can be empowering and oppressive (Coopman, 2003). Consequently, poetry as research and expression, like any mode of human expression, has its strengths and its weaknesses.

For many, the idea of deafness and poetry appear incommensurate. However, the popular understanding of deaf poetry as an oxymoron is not only a failure of imagination but it also reflects the legacy of audism, or the internalized belief that people with hearing loss are inferior (Clark, 2006). Poetry can be a tool for those with imaginations that are stifled by ableism, while also troubling relationships between language and reality. I would like to extend this logic and note that the poetics of disability can be used to parse out aspects of ableism by making internalized ableism apparent. Further, poetic articulations of disability disrupt ableist legacies by facilitating poetic narratives that feature a richness often denied to people with disabilities that are labeled as “broken.” Similarly, poetry provides an opportunity for health and disability researchers to write in a way that extends their own and others’ narrative imaginations while also attending to nuances that conventional forms of scholarship may neglect (Harter, Peterson, McKenna, & Torrens, 2012).

There are many intersections of poetry, disability, and health: the author may be disabled; the subject could be about disability, health, or illness; the poem could be about an idea or an experience connected to the body; the intended audience might include people with disabilities; or a number of combinatory possibilities exist. This expansive understanding has led to claims that “all ‘schools’ of poetry and the agencies that go along with them have disregarded ‘disability poetics’ as a category” (Bartlett et al., 2015, p. 271). To move beyond this impasse, differentiating between poetic artifacts and the politically significant embodied act of composing poems is necessary. This distinction is key because poems written by poets with a disability center ableism and power in an effort to brandish language to demonstrate an intimacy with the violence words inflict. In their introduction to a special issue of *Text and Performance Quarterly*, Rose and Ferris (2010) explain that poetics, or the sensory products of making, and poesies, or the actual moments of the making, are in concert with each other. As such, poetics can be used to perform embodiment, as well as to probe and make connections between thought and performance (Rose & Ferris, 2010). My use of poetry is in line with this tradition of using poetry as a performance of an embodied difference that is entrenched in language.



Research poetry is the use of poetry to present and interpret academic research (Ellis & Bochner, 1996; Faulkner, 2007; Görlich, 2015), and is a practice that goes by a number of names: *poetic transcription* (Carr, 2003; Ellingson, 2011; Richardson, 1993), *ethnopoetics* (Brady, 2008), *ethnographic or anthropological poetry* (Denzin, 2003), *research and interpretive poetry*, *poetic renarration* (Clark, 2014), *poetic form* (Willis, 2002), *autoethnographic poetry* or simply *poetry* (Faizullah, 2014; Rankine, 2014). Researchers may engage poetry with or without an awareness of poetic traditions and a respect for the craft of poetry (Faulkner, 2007). In addition to furthering these modes of cultural inquiry, by using poetry as a form of research reporting I am also in conversation with ethnographers that use affect theory, both implicitly and explicitly, to guide how they take notes, engage the world around them, and describe their experiences (Faulkner, 2007; Gregg & Seigworth, 2010; Pink, 2009; Stewart, 2011). Consequently, affect theory guides a myriad of choices about how my research subjects are experienced, how they are described, and how they ultimately are presented to an audience (Chawla, 2014; Gregg & Seigworth, 2010; Pink, 2009; Seigworth & Gregg, 2010; Stewart, 2011; Van Wyck, 2010). Accordingly, I have turned to poetry because it is a method of communicating research that challenges compulsory able-bodiedness in a way that seeks to expand narrative imagination—the influence stories have on what we think is possible and is not possible (Andrews, 2014). In other words, poetic transcriptions offer the affective possibility of an emotional connection between writers and readers that traverses embodied difference.

### **Interviews with Graduate Instructors with Hidden Disabilities**

This project revolves around semi-structured interviews with instructors with hidden disabilities and focuses on four primary areas of inquiry. I asked participants to tell me about: (1) their personal background; (2) their experiences/identity/ies as an educator; (3) their impairment or health condition; and (4) the discussions they have had with their students about their health condition/impairment. All three participants are graduate students that self-identify as having a hidden disability and have taught university-level classes. Graduate students were recruited from my institution and from other institutions. To protect interviewee confidentiality, some of their demographic information has been altered, and participants have been given pseudonyms.

### **Poetic Transcription**

Before sharing the poetry created from my participants' discourse, I explain my approach to poetic transcription. There are four concepts that characterize my approach to poetic transcription: (1) poetic transcription features the use of language with a measure of ambiguity; (2) poetic transcription highlights the meaning-building nature of language; (3) poetic transcription deploys the poetic form in order to communicate meanings not

commonly found in prose; and (4) poetic transcription seeks to evoke an emotional reaction in readers. After a short discussion concerning my use of poetic transcription as a method of reporting qualitative research, I introduce my participants and their stories.

The central departure of poetic transcription from other forms of qualitative thematic analysis is the essential ambiguity of poetry. Poetry showcases the ways in which language can be wielded to make meaning while also sanctioning the risks inherent in communication—risking misinterpretation, misunderstandings, missed allusions, and missed messages. Similarly, everyday life for a person with a hidden disability is often beset by such missteps in communication. The presence of multiple possible meanings and creative effects of ambiguity are both facets that are common to poetry. However, engaging with these issues falls beyond the scope of this essay. Poetry’s ambiguity also means that there is no wrong way to read or experience it, and this includes poetic transcriptions.

Research poetry is the crafted use of language to evoke an emotional response from the reader (Faulkner, 2009). Research poetry effectively highlights the power and control of the researcher as writer—because it begins with participants’ discourse that is subsequently transformed into narrative poetry by the researcher. The process of transcribing, writing, and editing entails a series of choices, that when finalized, obscure the poesies of the writing process. In choosing poetry-as-research, the ethics of writing are put front-and-center. The poetic form reveals the immutable subjectivity inherent in writers’ decisions about what to include, how to punctuate moments, when to begin and end a narrative, how to organize words on paper, and how to best realize participant discourse as a poem. Rather than relying on traditional conventions, as often happens with long-form prose, various nontraditional forms of writing such as poetry throw back the curtain on these behind-the-scenes choices, and those who care to look will observe a more intricate craftsmanship of writing. Accordingly, this piece uses poetry to embody the concept that people *do things with words*; and the poems presented here are doing things with others’ words—they are collaborative performances.

Poetry and poetic transcription extend beyond the capacity of prose to create experiential knowledge. Poetry also frequently strives to create an affect in readers moving their eyes and ideas towards a thought that has no exact prose equivalent. Artists—poets, painters, musicians, filmmakers, and the like—turn to making art to express ideas that would struggle to exist in the structure of traditional prose or in any other medium of expression. The words of my interviewees have been shaped into poems through my reinterpretation of the way the participants’ discourse is rendered—spatially—on a page. Following Ellingson (2011), my use of concrete poetry—that is, poetry that uses space and location—also relies on the exact words of my participants and the original sequence of utterances. In other words, this aspiration for

fidelity to the original utterance preserves the context the interviewee provided during the interview (Lindahl, 2012). Concrete poetry is a type of poetry that highlights how the act of seeing words in space and on paper creates meaning in concert with syntax and semiotics (Hanson, 2009; Perloff, 2008). Concrete poetry manipulates readers' awareness of placement while making the hand of the writer visible in a way that often produces an aesthetic and linguistic gestalt. As such, the space of the page is a formal aspect of communication that parallels the material space for dialogue between the speaker and the reader. For example, just as placing something at the end of the sentence creates emphasis, dedicating an entire line to a word creates emphasis and may augment the rhythm and flow of a stanza. In other cases, the neat appearance of uninterrupted words may have a comparatively more polished feel. Such movements and textures may echo an aspect of the interview. In other words, space is a part of how meaning is crafted, held in place, or disregarded—like the now-demolished building described earlier, words are crafted and held in a place as to delay their drift from relevance.

Poems unfold in a tempo the poet sets through line breaks, sound, punctuation, spaces, and sounds. Form is content. In other words, the medium of poetry is a central part of this article's meaning. The poetic form aims to generate affect while simultaneously explicating the interviewee's experience in their own words. Poetry's ability to create memorable moments for readers is connected to its relationship to the bicameral mind (Jaynes, 1982). In other words, one theory of consciousness posits that the brain of early humans could only "speak" in epic poem-like stanzas before the ability to differentiate between one's self and others evolved. In this way, poetry resembles the languages of our ancestors.

In order to let my participants speak for themselves (Lindahl, 2012), I perform a departure from familiar facets of qualitative research reporting: I will neither frame each poem nor help readers interpret them. After all, the interviewees are more knowledgeable about their experience than I can hope to be. Rather than providing an interpretation for each poem, I will introduce the interviewees by describing how they identify as having a hidden disability, and by highlighting one of the ways their poem extends the limits of prose.

## **Participants**

Donna, age 23, is a graduate student who has lived with bipolar disorder since childhood. Our interview took place over Skype messages. Her interview revealed a reluctant acquiescence to what some have called edutainment, or the need to entertain students to enable learning. Donna's story includes elaborate background information that seldom survives the cutting room floor and reaches final manuscripts. These details are included here because they form the atmosphere of self-doubt that is mirrored by her understandings of the psychological environment in her classroom.

Nancy, age 24, is a graduate student who I interviewed in person. She has a hearing impairment that primarily affects one of her ears. Nancy's interview revealed the ways in which practicality guides how she communicates her disability in her classroom. Nancy's mood is communicated through the patterned placement of her words. Her experiences of not being taken seriously are counter-posed to the ways she speaks about the students' responsibility to communicate clearly in the classroom.

Anthony, age 26, is a graduate student who was rushed to the emergency room for gastritis and an inflamed gallbladder mid-semester, and thus, commencing a life-long effort of managing a life-threatening and chronic health condition. We spoke in person and Anthony's interview revolved around the higher education value of transparency in teaching. Anthony's poem employs form to juxtapose the various experiences of control and order that accompany such a sudden onset of a life-threatening disease.

The cultural values of edutainment, practicality, and transparency emerged from the interviews we shared, and the poems I subsequently crafted are an expression of these values in the words of the participants. These values are not unique to the experience of disability, but rather, they operate as a kind of invitation to strengthen one's relationship with higher education regardless of dis/ability. Such values reflect a recognition that educational institutions, like any organization or group of people, operate according to a set of shared ideals that guide interactions and relationship developments. This context of hidden disabilities troubles the presumption of neutrality that many educational institutions often embrace. The participants' narratives provide insight into how cultural values guide education and function in the everyday lives of students, faculty, administrators, and alumni.

## Poetic Transcriptions

### *"Lies for Learning," Donna*

He was very violent towards my family.

None of us were really in great shape there, but

we

were never removed

from the home.

I was 7

when

things got a little too real;

I attempted suicide

and my mother

had

me

entered into a

mental health care facility

Where I received my

diagnosis

and  
my  
first  
rounds of

treatment.

I was  
the first  
person in

my  
family

diagnosed with

bipolar disorder.

They thought  
I was being dramatic

if I said,  
“I didn’t  
like

my medicine.”

My family ignored really significant side effects.

My mother stopped believing

I had

bipolar disorder.

My father was diagnosed

with

bipolar disorder.

The family changed

because  
if my  
father  
said  
he had

it,

it validated

it  
as a real issue.

I love teaching. I get all mushy about  
what it means to share knowledge  
in a classroom.

My stress is gone after  
I teach.  
It's all  
rainbows and butterflies.

Cue  
the cheesy  
telenovela music.  
Teaching is learning and letting others learn too.  
Teaching is helping them know new  
things.

I call myself a hypocrite. I have yet to disclose my condition  
to my class.

I want to tell them.  
I want to tell them but  
it attaches  
me to the  
bad things they  
think they know  
about  
mental illness,  
especially  
bipolar disorder.

I am afraid.  
I am afraid  
I'll end up  
just reinforcing the things I want to correct.  
I don't trust  
them with that.

I want my students to trust me  
because that is how I  
get them  
to learn,  
and try  
new things.  
If they don't trust me  
they don't  
want  
to learn  
from me.

I include  
examples of  
Mental health,  
Inclusion,  
Essentialism, and  
Social change.

It feels disingenuous.  
I tell myself, "I'm not lying."

I lie and get mad  
at  
myself for  
disappointing  
myself.

I will  
think about it  
for hours.

The  
is so cognitive dissonance  
big.

When you're  
making progress  
accepting yourself  
but don't let  
others  
accept you,  
you question whether or not  
you're comfortable with  
yourself.

I disclose pretty regularly—  
in my personal life  
disclosure  
isn't an issue.

As an instructor,  
because mental illness  
is an illness  
of the tool

you're training the  
competence  
of that

tool

is in question, as is  
your  
competence as  
an instructor.



***“You’re mumbling. Stop that,” Nancy***

I went to a random doctor.

They looked at me with this look on their face  
and said, “Have you tried holding your nose and blowing really hard?”

I didn’t have a response.

I just told you I’ve been having a pressure problem with my ears for  
literally six months, constant trouble and that is your question?

She treated me like I was 12.

This is not a:

My ears popped once  
And I can’t get them to go back.

This is an actual issue.

She gave me some  
shitty ideas.

Being told

I’m imagining things makes me question myself.

I’m tired of students getting all-skittish when I ask them to repeat themselves.

I didn’t want to have to deal with that every single time.

“No,” I’m not passive aggressively telling you, “you’re stupid.”

I literally *cannot* hear you.

I made a joke out of it

they laughed at it,

“but seriously, be mindful.”

*Speak slowly.*

*Speak loudly.*

*Enunciate.*

That will help everyone.

It makes you seem more confident.

It makes it easier for everyone to hear you.

Now

I could just be like, “Can’t hear you!”

And they’d get it.

It lets me use a shorthand:

“You’re mumbling. Stop that.”

***“Not hiding anything,” Anthony***

I felt like someone had taken a rod and shoved it into my stomach and was like digging around.

“We need to take you to the doctor.”

“No, I can deal with this.”

I made it twenty minutes into class and was like, “I can’t do this.”  
We went to the doctor.

In 24-hours we went to four hospitals. I was heavily medicated.  
I sent them an email.

It is like gastritis, overly enflamed gallbladder (there is a really long technical term that I can’t pronounce that’s like five words and fifty letters long that pretty much means that for about a year and a half my body was slowly shutting down my gallbladder).

At that point, it just completely shut off.  
I never knew I had any issues until I got really sick.

The first day of class, they don’t see any of my tattoos,  
but on the second day I come with it exposed.  
I’m like, “Look, I’m not hiding anything from you. There’s no point.”

I had no intention of becoming a teacher.  
I went from working in a lab to being up in front of the classroom talking to people.  
I get a rush,  
I wake up  
I love it.  
I can tell that my heart rate goes up  
    a little bit,  
    not from nervousness but from excitement.  
My body posture gets a lot more open.

On days that I teach, I have more energy throughout the day.  
Teaching is a means  
    to discovery,  
    for the teacher and the student

My gallbladder  
became clogged.  
It shut  
down.

That put the rest of my body  
into shut down.  
My body started going  
into kidney  
failure  
and liver  
failure.

They were like,  
“If you wouldn’t have come in you  
probably would have  
died within  
24 hours.”

Once back, I took the first fifteen minutes to explain what happened,  
“I’m okay now. I’m here.”

I told them what happened.  
I was very personal about it.  
I didn’t  
hide anything from them because  
I didn’t think I needed to.

They genuinely started to care about who  
I was

as  
a person  
besides just  
as  
a sage on the stage in front of the classroom.

I tell them, the first day of class, “If something happens come tell me. Just  
tell me and we will work with it.”

That goes both ways.  
If something happens in my life  
that’s going to shift the dynamic  
of the class I’m going to tell you.

That idea of transparency needs  
to happen between  
professors and students.

## Discussion and Conclusion

This research highlights some of the experiences of graduate instructors with hidden disabilities by rendering them in a way that disrupts universalist assumptions about learning, knowledge, intelligence, and ability. In other words, universalizing tendencies silence voices that do not gracefully submit to generalizations (Harding, 1986, 2006). This silencing may, at times, be literal, but other times silencing is accomplished indirectly. Since conventions of language and expression are inherently limiting, researchers committed to social justice should be more willing to explore other modes of communicating their research. In addition to cultivating an awareness of how scholarship can perpetuate ableist structures, disability scholarship is also poised to demonstrate how the act of research can be used to destabilize ableist systems. More importantly, disability scholars can use research as an opportunity to instantiate their own praxes in order to critique some of the rampantly ableist dimensions of academia.

The cultural values of edutainment, practicality, and transparency underpin the stories told by the educators I spoke with. These values facilitate belonging and reflect the recognition that educational institutions have sets of shared ideals that reinforce the roles instructors are expected to play. While the values and the narratives presented here were treated in a way as to reflect productive moments, it is important to acknowledge that cultural values are never neutral. Values are intrinsically volatile, slippery, malleable, and subjective. Nevertheless, values play an integral part in higher education. Successful leaders recognize the role values play in streamlining the everyday interactions of the people they lead (Hackman & Johnson, 2013). Similarly, values also regulate interactions among students, faculty, administrators, and alumni.

As an instructor with a hidden disability, listening to others talk about how they negotiate the space in front of a classroom was, as I had suspected, humbling and enlightening. Each narrative of being a misfit dramatically expanded my own options for enacting the role of an instructor with a hidden disability. Attention to the temporal and spatial relationships that create misfits grants agency to people who are otherwise at risk of social devaluation (Garland-Thompson, 2011). Contrary to what I once thought, the participants revealed that there is no “correct” way to occupy a marginalized identity. Rather, there are ample possibilities for bringing unique bodies into alignment with the core values that bind organizations and groups. More importantly, portraits of instructors with hidden disabilities, such as those I have shared, can be deployed to nurture the imagination of people who believe that they have never encountered instructors with hidden disabilities. Similarly, these narratives may enrich those who are otherwise unable to imagine how people navigate the world of the academy while having a hidden disability. Narrative imagination—or the stories that enable our ability to contemplate

the future—is always at work in everyday life (Andrews, 2014). Being able to imagine difference—both seen and unseen—allows people with divergent interests to form communities, groups, and organizations, and especially to establish ethical connections with others.

Moreover, narratives about health and disability are dynamic vehicles of cultural values. However, as Dutta (2008) points out, “Those who have access to power also determine the stories that will circulate within the discursive space of culture” (p. 111). As such, while the stories of these misfits in front of the classroom are transgressive on one level—as stories that reflect a particular context—Dutta might also assert that these narratives ultimately reify the status quo by foregrounding certain aspects of their stories while backgrounding others. Alternately, these stories about teaching with a hidden disability are a part of an insider research project, and as such, there is a distinct possibility that the stories told to people unaffiliated with academia may sound very different and may serve different ends.

My participants revealed that a tenuous duplicity is required of people with hidden disabilities. Their living embodiments rely on a cultural bond with the groups they belong to. For university instructors, these bonds are often overextended because they must also do the work of holding together educational apparatuses that frequently label individuals in binaried ways as (un)exceptional, (un)intelligent, and (under)valued. For instructors with hidden disabilities, the cultural values discussed here may seem like soothing balms for their strained emotional labor of teaching in a space where ableism and disability are positioned as estranged mates.

Future research on how individuals perform and disclose hidden disabilities should be attuned to the specific cultural values present in particular contextualized spaces. Inquiries into the nature of teaching and difference would benefit from parallel inquiries into the cultural values of higher education, graduate education, and graduate teacher training. Of course, such an investigation should guard against tendencies to universalize values that circulate in different ways for different people within university spaces.

Like other human interactions, an instructor’s disclosure or non-disclosure are acts that construct the communicative viability of their presence in the classroom. Stewart’s (2007) claim, “what affects us—the sentience of a situation—is also a dwelling,” illustrates how place and being are always interconnected in numerous ways (p. 4). People with hidden disabilities understand that knowledge about their condition, if shared, will create a dwelling place. This awareness is tied to the ways disclosures and nondisclosures alike fortify relationships. This interdependency builds the walls, the doors, and the windows of a shared dwelling. There is no avoiding the ways these choices about how we choose to be different together invite an immutable salience. The poems in this work exemplify how the university is a place where people with hidden disabilities dwell, interact, embody, and wrestle with togetherness while also occupying the position of a misfit.

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