

Paralympic Cultures: Disability as Paradigm

Colette Conroy

Abstract

This is an article about the Paralympic Games of summer 2012 and the experience of watching them. It rehearses the use of disability as political and cultural identity in relation to theatre and performance studies. Disability identity is not an identity based on similitude, but is a complex and nuanced relationship between singularity of embodied social experience and glimmers of common ground. Taking the works of Rod Michalko and Petra Kuppers as a representative foundation of disability studies, the article offers disability as an epistemological standpoint, a way of thinking, and not an object of thought. The argument works through close readings of three examples to introduce the theatre and performance studies reader to the notion of disability as a paradigm for the consideration of ideas of difference, similitude and identity. The process of reading the Paralympics from the perspective of a disabled person, bike riding sports fan and disability performance scholar gestures to the scope and potential of disability performance studies. The article accumulates three examples of one disabled person navigating a complex set of positions, all of which are iterations of disability. Whilst this critical approach might imply solipsism, the article also considers disability as community.

Myth says what it says, and says that this is what it says, and in this way organises the world of humanity with its speech.²

This is an article about the Paralympics in summer 2012, but it is also about encounters with disability as a concept, along with thoughts about the interaction of disability, performance and lived reality. Rod Michalko writes about disability as an epistemological standpoint, “[t]hinking with” disability instead of “about it” recommends that we “[t]hink through” (disturb?) those places ready-made – usually by nondisabled others – for disabled people.³ My article accepts disability as a way of thinking, and not an object of thought. My structure proliferates experiences that do not sit together in a conceptual category of identity and my argument introduces the theatre and performance studies reader to the notion of disability as a paradigm for the consideration of notions of difference, similitude and identity.

In formulating his argument for disability as epistemology, Michalko draws upon Donna Haraway’s notion of a ‘great underground terrain of subjugated knowledges’.⁴ ‘Coming out’ as disabled involves a negotiated performance of the relationships between the structures that ‘do’ disability in multiple conflicting ways. The process of reading the Paralympics from the perspective of disabled person, cycling sports fan and disability performance scholar gestures to the scope and potential of disability performance studies. By the end of this article I will have accumulated three examples of one disabled person (me) navigating a complex set of positions, all of which are iterations of disability. Whilst this critical approach might imply solipsism, I will also consider disability as community.

Disability identity is not an identity based on similitude, but is a complex and nuanced relationship between the singularity of embodied social experience and glimmers of common ground. Petra Koppers writes of the appearance of ‘horizons of community’ in relation to disability community performance, drawing on the work of Jean-Luc Nancy to explore the ways in which disability cultural aesthetics institute a promise of community through sharing moments of different experience, articulating togetherness on the basis of corporeal specificity in a shared world.⁵ Koppers and Michalko offer an imperative for the disabled person to examine the experience of one’s own multiple perspectives, and to treat this experience as the basis of knowledge.

Makers and scholars of disability culture have framed the epistemological world in a way that enables us to recognize that the telling of the story of the blind men and the elephant gets it quite wrong. In the tale, a group of blind men are invited to describe the creature that is in front of them. Feeling the massive side, the sinuous trunk or the smooth tusk of the elephant gives the individual a direct and immediate experience, but in the story, the men describe their experience, and they are somehow wrong. They are mistaken about the nature of the creature because their experience lacks an overall perspective. An engagement with disability culture and performance offers a way of rejecting this framework. The sensory world, the detail of texture, recounting moments of experience, can all compose cultural elaborations that can found community, reducing the gap between the idealized external perspective and the unique sensory experience of the individual.⁶ The revelation of the spectacle of the elephant is not the telos of the story, but one experience, one spectator’s reality. The process of questioning the authority and universality of this idealized spectator is common ground between disability and all other discourses of cultural identity.

In *The Inoperative Community*, Jean-Luc Nancy explores the way that community is founded in an act of speech, a certain sort of speech: myth. There’s a moment where diverse separate

experiences are brought together – called together – in an act of speech. Nancy figures community as an effect founded in performance and in relation to narratives of origin. The storyteller offers a story of the foundation of the community in the past, and the telling of this story in the present is what founds the community. ‘Myth says what it says, and says that this is what it says, and in this way organizes the world of humanity with its speech.’⁷ This is, of course, a paradox. At the point where we recognize the paradox at the centre of myth, myth is interrupted. The crucial point for this article is the relationship between the apparently constative content of myth making, and the regulatory performative effects of community. There is an effect, a glimmer of comprehension of the connection between self and community. For Koppers, the ‘horizons of community’ recede as we approach them: ‘Wanting to listen, hear and tell, we are abandoned to the distance between the story and our I.’⁸

Myth is necessary for community: it promises for a moment to fit our experiences into a coherent articulation. It fails, because community fluctuates between what appears to be descriptive or representational, and what we can articulate as performative, or political; between a sense of origin and a desire. Disability is not a straightforward term to use, and in this critical context it needs to be owned. Comparing our bodies or our cognitive patterns or our ways of perceiving or understanding the world leads us away from community and into a world of medicalized discourse, set against the world of normality. Disability is called into being in a number of performative moments. Or, to put it another way, disability community is founded in moments that serve as myth.

Moments of enlightenment are mythic for all minority groups of people – the moments in history when this right was given or taken away, the moment of this riot claiming a speaking perspective of anger. It is a moment when the group became a group, when we became ‘we’. But true to the paradox, we became ‘we’ only in the sense that we already were ‘we’. Nancy tells us, ‘there can be no community outside of myth’.⁹

A confluence of personal interests in this global event of the Paralympics offered me some interesting methodological problems, the greatest of which seemed to be that of finding a perspective from which to write. I’m an enthusiastic consumer of disability arts and am indebted to disability culture and theory. I also like watching sport, but only really the sports I participate in – distance running, cycling and, lately, triathlon. I only started to put sport and disability together when people started to ask me what I thought about the forthcoming Paralympics, and I realized that I didn’t know.

So I have chosen three moments, three texts from the vast wealth of material available to me. One is an utterance of optimism, one an experience of jealousy and one is a moment of televised spectacle. Although this approach simplifies to an extent that may seem crude, these moments as texts help me to distil moments of meaning-creation, and point to some of the ideas I find interesting and important in the intersection of disability and sport. Hopefully this essay will serve as an irritant, provoking responses that in turn clarify my thinking in this area.

Text One: An Optimistic Utterance

The text is this: ‘Colette, will the Paralympics change things?’

When David Cameron, the British Prime Minister drew upon the experience of the Paralympic Games in his Party Conference speech in autumn 2012, he suggested that the Paralympians had effected a change in social attitudes to disabled people:

When I used to push my son Ivan around in his wheelchair, I always thought that some people saw the wheelchair, not the boy. Today more people would see the boy and not the wheelchair – and that’s because of what happened here this summer.¹⁰

Cameron’s recognition of the link between disability and the Paralympics is enormously interesting because, in it, we see a moment where Cameron’s young son is placed in the frame of the Paralympic athlete. ‘Disability’ is used as a frame to read a boy as a person. The frame is taught – or learned – from the sporting event. We also see Cameron offering a causal correlation between the Paralympics and improved attitudes to disabled people. Somehow, this correlation implies, Paralympic athletes succeeded in shifting something that decades of disability activism did not.

My chosen text reflects a series of perceptions about the weight of expectation about the Paralympics. Each repetition of the question, ‘Colette, will the Paralympics change things?’, implied heavily that the speaker knew that the Paralympics were political and related to the politics of disability. This anecdotal encounter is replicated in the findings of a Bournemouth University study of attitudinal shifts that showed that interviewees believed that the Paralympics had changed attitudes to disability, including their own.¹¹ It feels like a mythic moment of making community with disabled people.

The process of televising the Paralympics was preceded by an extraordinarily careful and detailed public education programme in which spectators had to be introduced to the lives of the individual medal hopefuls and engaged in the stories of these Paralympians’ own specific impairment events and/or struggles. Spectators also had to be carefully educated in the Paralympic classificatory systems. During the Paralympics it was not unusual to hear people who formerly knew nothing about sport – let alone disability sport – discussing the precise disciplines of T4 class athletics, as if the rules of the sport and the scheme of bodily description entered cultural consciousness as a new way of relating sport and disability to each other. Public commentary and bureaucratic categorization make disabled sporting bodies discursive, and offer an interpretative schema.

Many other writers on disability have rightly made the point that this change of perspective had its administrative correlative. The process of recalibrating and re-dividing the ‘deserving’ and the ‘undeserving’ poor was underway at the time of Cameron’s speech quoted above. It is a foundational tenet of social model disability studies in the UK that disability was called into being as a category at the point when the Poor Law Act of 1834 made efforts to separate paupers into the ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’.¹² This moment was the birth of disability, a point where people with bodily differences were recognized to be unemployable because their bodies did not fit the machines of the factories of the industrial revolution. The summer that, for Cameron, changed the synecdochal relationship between disabled people and their access equipment, functions as a similarly foundational moment – a reordering or reframing of disability. It is straightforward and, I think, fair to set out the irony in the juxtaposition of the spectacle of the glorious, glossy Paralympics with its heroically impaired athletes and banks of cheering crowds, and the private (often inaccessible) and medicalized Work Capability Assessment, with its isolated fearful subjects.¹³

This reframing process was instigated by the UK's Conservative-led coalition government, a political administration that wanted above all to look again at disabled people and see them as less ill, less poor, less segregated and therefore not entitled to support from the UK welfare state. Disabled people had to be seen again, and they had to be seen to be fewer. In this context the looking is, of course, an administrative process, undertaken by a process of Work Capability Assessments, run by Atos, a multinational company that – and the irony has been explored in considerable detail elsewhere – sponsored much of the Paralympic spectacle.¹⁴ The act of re-counting individual disabled people in an attempt to reduce (welfare benefit-receiving) numbers can be set alongside the act of re-framing disability.

In discussion with Jenny Sealey, co-artistic director of the Paralympic opening ceremony and Artistic Director of Graeae Theatre Company, she told me that she was especially concerned that the political context of Work Capability Assessments should not eclipse the work of disabled artists.¹⁵ With characteristic good humour, she rebuked me for trying to frame the Paralympics in this way. We can't not want disability to be visible, she argued. Financially and critically neglected artists and performers found a global audience through the Paralympics and the Unlimited Festival that accompanied the Games and that showcased the work of nearly 200 disabled artists.¹⁶ This felt to Sealey, and to many like her, an absolutely enormous and revolutionary event. I agree that we should not expect the artists and makers of the event to include within the event components that can only exist outside it. It also seems quite wrong to imply that the Paralympics in some way causes or maintains a system of inequality such as unequal access to the welfare state.

Disability is not a straightforward category, nor is it a concept. Artists and athletes performing in the Paralympics are at one side of an administrative fissure. Benefit recipients with chronic illnesses are at another. The political uses of disability in Cameron's utterance offer to position his son within a culturally legible frame – that of sport. The art works of the Unlimited Festival, and the Paralympic opening ceremony, offer the opportunity to glimpse a 'horizon of community' by presenting articulations of disability from artists. The optimistic question that forms my text here requires alertness to disability as political and disability as performative.

The staging of the Paralympics sits awkwardly on the boundaries of disability culture. Paralympic athletes have specific physical or sensory impairments, but the frame of reading the body is not disability; rather, it is that of 'handicap', in the sports sense of trying to adjust athletes' conditions of competition in order to achieve an equal contest. The impairments are legible according to a schema shown here in Image 1 (represented as stick figures on a grid, showing specific limbs or parts of limbs with dotted lines) in which one associates a real body with a Paralympic classification. This analysis of Paralympic bodies stands against the broad cultural and political engagement of disability culture. In their book *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political*, Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou echo Gayatri Spivak and write of recognition – the three part structure of human needs: love, rights and respect – as 'that which we cannot not want'.¹⁷ Yet they fear that recognition and the conditions for recognizability produce the conceptual and perceptual frame that becomes regulatory.

Image 1 Extract from *ITU Paratriathlon Classification Rules and Regulations Manual*: image courtesy of International Triathlon Union.

Decades of writing in disability studies have examined the effects of medicalized narratives on the bodies of disabled people. To frame the individual as ill, as faulty, as awaiting a cure, has profound effects on their autonomy, their right to a voice in their own and public affairs, and their ability to claim their rights to equal access to culture. Attitudes to disability take many forms, from name-calling (perplexingly, I was called Flid at school, an abbreviation of 'Thalidomide', a drug to which I have no relationship), to inappropriately offered charity (a friend of mine used to be given money when simply walking down the street), to the assumptions about bodies, their shapes and their capabilities that make life difficult for many people. Attitudes change, and we feel them change. It is only in the last fifteen years that I have felt freedom from intrusive questions and touches. I do not get asked, 'what happened to your hand?', and yet it is certain that if I were in the Paralympics the commentator would have the story available. It is difficult to understand the assertion of bodily autonomy alongside the spectator's detailed critical understanding of athletes' impairment stories.

The easy expertise that the engaged spectator of the Paralympics acquires about impairment and categorization doesn't fit into the injurious frame of name calling or unwanted charity, but it is still far from the free articulation of embodiment and the sharing of experience that Koppers and other disability activists call 'Crip Culture'. My question, then, is about the use of categories, and why I feel ambivalent about the stick figure diagram, and about submitting my own body to its interpretative structure when I start to compete at triathlon next year.

All Paralympic sports have such impairment profiles, which form the rules of Para athletics.¹⁸ The stick figures show the ways individuals can be classified in Paralympic sport so that they can compete on roughly equal terms. The mode of representation is reductive and simplistic. The vast majority of impairments are not representable under this regime. How might one represent epilepsy? Or an impairment that causes chronic fatigue? The simple answer is that such relatively complex impairments are not part of the Paralympic Games schema, but are an important part of disability culture. The stick figures offer a representational world that includes some and excludes others, creating disability as a concept to be applied to certain very active bodies. Irrespective of their personal identity as disabled or non-disabled, the dancers and performers in Sealey's opening ceremony were a much more diverse grouping than the athletes. Seventy-three Deaf and disabled professional performers were employed and sixty-eight disabled volunteers worked the opening ceremony.¹⁹ In keeping with disability cultural politics, these individuals self-identified, and the grid of impairment of external classification therefore has no relevance to their appearance as disabled people. They were engaged in a performance of disability politics, juxtaposed with the regulatory system of Paralympic impairment profiles.

Giorgio Agamben wrote that '[e]xception reifies the structure of sovereignty'.²⁰ The Paralympics teaches its audience to readily classify disabled people and to find pleasure in their equalized competition and in their extraordinary athletic bodies. The biographies and physical classifications of Paralympians are a crucial part of the sports spectatorship. The spectator acquires skills in the recognition and classification of athletic disabled bodies and learns to attach these to the pleasures of sports spectatorship. The ways in which the individual is 'exceptional' underlines the stability and the safeness of the notions of athleticism and disability. Within the Paralympics, disability is visible, narratively complex and a barrier that has already been overcome. And athleticism is based on stoicism, hard work and the desire to overcome physical limitation. The confluence of disability and athleticism here offers us a glimpse of a performance in which the autonomous individual

overcomes their own limitation in order to compete on equal terms. It is difficult to think of a better ideological form to serve the needs of a post-industrial capitalist society.

Text Two: The Storey Story

Somehow the reality that is global and mediatized sports entertainment is turned into a visceral empathy that I feel in my body as I mess about doing bike sprints. As I turn the final corner and approach the university bike shed in the morning, the legs that turn the cranks belong to Cavendish or Hushovd. If you don't know who these people are then that just serves to tell you that you don't pay the same critical attention to bike racing as me. My body has made a connection between my sensations and the analytical corpus that is the bike race. I learn the conventions of sport spectatorship, and I perform them. I feel them in my body. There's a deep connection between watching and doing.

The world of sport is primarily ordered in terms of sexual difference, but this difference is used to separate competitions within the sport from each other – women and men rarely compete in the same race or event. There is a split at the foundation of the sport. The furor over aspects of Caster Semenya's sex identity indicated that there are astonishing levels of anxiety about the security of this foundational split.

The enormous interest in Oscar Pistorius was one of the important debates that framed the 2012 games. Notions of fairness, advantage and disadvantage had a long run-up. Similarly, the Paralympic cyclist Sarah Storey was very nearly selected to ride for the British Road Cycling team. These examples indicate that the figure of the Paralympic athlete as a category puzzle was one of the very early parts of the Paralympic coverage. Yet before the split between male and female athletes, or between Paralympic and Olympic athletes, comes a split that is not televised or in any other way avowed: the split between athlete and non-athlete; between participant and non-participant; between the fit and the wheezy. 'The spectator', Freud tells us,

is a person who experiences too little, who feels that he is a 'poor wretch to whom nothing of importance can happen', who has long been obliged to damp down, or rather displace, his ambition to stand in his own person in the hub of world affairs.²¹

Within the terms of sport spectatorship, the world is ordered by this physical difference, but we carefully suppress this knowledge.

I don't have any fingers on my left hand. I often forget this, and so do most other people. I was 25 before I stopped feeling startled when I noticed in a mirror the difference between the two sides of my body. If I accidentally bump my elbow it sometimes sets off nerve pains that create phantom fingers – ghosts of fingers I never had, but which my brain has culturally prepared for. The ability to know one's own body relies heavily on the resolution of multiple different sensations and observations, cultural and neural. My *experience* of my body has inner sensation but no external manifestation. When imagining my external appearance, the two parts of self-perception seem not to match. This is why jealousy is a difficult text. The resolution of different sensations of embodiment into some kind of unpleasant emotion is an uncomfortable process.

There's a tendency to respond to the pattern, the idea, and not the object. When somebody holds two objects out for me to take, one in each hand, even if I only put one hand out to accept one object, the holder of the objects will frequently release both, causing one to crash to the floor. Empathy works on the basis of a desire to empathize, and not on any form of precise schema or list of similarities or differences. The injunction to 'see the person' speaks of a will to engage with empathy.

My early bike riding years were spent with only my front brake, and the toes of my shoes to help me to stop in extremis at road junctions. A chance conversation with a bike mechanic alerted me to the possibilities of adapting my machine so I could stop more safely, if I should ever wish to. He said that Sarah Storey had the same hand as me. I went home and googled Storey. The shock of seeing Storey's image on the web was startling – a real, intense bodily shock. It is difficult to account for this. My easy empathy with bike riders of any gender, sexuality, build, and so on is based on a liking for his or her courage, attitude, panache, bike-handling skills. But there is an exact similitude that placed my body in the frame of their own performance – and failed. At the point where I read Storey as *the same* as me I felt angry and disappointed – *why* did I not know until now that there was such a thing as Paralympic cycling? Why did my bike not fit my body like hers did? Here's my guilty secret: *if I had known that there was such a thing as adapted bikes and Paralympic bike races I would, absolutely without any doubt whatsoever, have won a gold medal.*

Storey is, of course, a talented athlete and I am a commuter cyclist with asthma and a sedentary job. Storey spent her youth being hot-housed as a Paralympic swimmer. I spent mine smoking and drinking. My failure to win four gold medals at the 2012 Paralympic Games can be stacked alongside my failure to run a three-hour marathon, my failure to discover the Higgs Boson and many other such failures that for most of the time do not even impinge upon my consciousness. Yet the failure of spectatorial pleasure and engagement was, for me, an important experience.

The act of empathy and identification has a profound generosity that is utterly divorced from lived reality. The generosity of this act can be undermined by the way that it is framed. Seeing the frame shift from 'utterly unlike me' athlete to 'quite a lot like me but still an athlete' made me feel – *jealous*.

Although I am attuned to and thankful for the many achievements of disability arts and culture, I am disappointed to find in my own structures of reception no part of me that resonates with recognition of physical similitude. Is it possible that this aspect of my body has no recognition or pleasure in my own perception of myself?

The text of jealousy, of spectatorial failure, is one that rarely figures in the process of founding community. The relationship between the 'super-crip' and the ordinary disabled spectator is a peculiarly tense one. A colleague, who is a wheelchair user, told me that during the Paralympics she was approached repeatedly by individuals who wanted to know which event she was competing in. This text – my own jealousy – was a particularly interesting one to look at from the frame of identity politics. I was immersed in social model disability politics in the mid-1990s. This framework discursively shifts disability from the body to the organization of society. For example, the student who uses a wheelchair is not disabled by his body, but by my decision to schedule a class at the top of a flight of stairs. The jealousy emerges at the point where I understand that I hadn't thought to question the framing of the world around me. I turn my frustration with my younger self onto the spectacular

performance of Sarah Storey. The visceral failure or refusal of identity creates a gulf that threatens to disrupt globalized sporting community. Focusing on the specific differences of skills and machinery between Storey and me forces recognition that identity and identification require very specific circumstances to allow their pleasures to emerge.

Text Three: A Moment of Spectacle

My third and final text, and the closest to the overview of the elephant is a moment of spectacle taken from the Paralympic opening ceremony.

At some point towards the end of the televised 2012 Paralympic opening ceremony the cameras cut away and return to show the centre of the stadium dominated by a giant inflatable reproduction of the Marc Quinn sculpture, *Alison Lapper Pregnant* that in its original marble incarnation graced the empty fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square, London from 2005 to 2007. The final moments of the performance are a rendition of the gay anthem 'I Am What I Am', sung by Beverley Knight and signed by Caroline Parker. *I am what I am*.

The song is translated – dot matrix and BSL sign song. Cutting to an aerial view, there's a mass of people moving, small dots, smaller even than the dot matrix words. As the camera gives us a rare full-stadium shot, we see that around the sculpture hundreds of people dance (Image 2). It is a nightmare of scale.

Image 2 Replica of Marc Quinn's *Alison Lapper Pregnant* in the 2012 Paralympic Games opening ceremony: photo credit: Annabel Bird <http://insideology.com>, twitter handle: @insideology.

The Lapper image appears as a motionless giant, fixed, a point for navigation through disability culture. The sculpture is not a symbol, but a towering and recognizable shape. The eyes are white, the expression blank. Quinn's sculpture had already made some moves towards becoming mythic. But here the scale is wrong and so the convention of statuary that creates the appearance of eyes on a twenty-foot statue seems monstrous in the huge blown-up version. I am not suggesting for a moment that there's anything at all monstrous about Lapper. But here, in a 3-D likeness of her body, its softness and size are rendered hard and giant, its movement and colours have become white and smooth and monumental. The sculpture has moved from being a problematic sculpture of a woman to being a magnified statue of the sculpture. It is a thing. It is not a person. It is several stages removed from person-hood.

The foundations of disability cultural studies examined the implications of the prolific appearance of images of disability in the arts, matched by the relative absence of disabled artists. The process of uniting critiques of representation in the arts and politics are exemplified in works like James I. Charlton's *Nothing About Us Without Us* in which the author frames his argument with these words, 'When others speak for you, you lose.'²² Strategies to address notions of disability politics and cultural experience emerge from the elaborated and complex experience of disability. What happens when the disabled person who is represented is removed two times from the representation? I have wondered whether other people see it as important that the Paralympics opened with hundreds of people dancing around a representation that was *literally*, full of air.

Agamben observes how, for Foucault, the panopticon became an epistemological figure.²³ The rendering of a likeness of a pregnant disabled woman into a giant statue of a sculpture might well serve as a similar paradigm. As Agamben reminds us, the paradigm works through example – analogy, not metaphor. It isn't a poetic or symbolic transference of meaning, and so we can't read deeply into it in search of the truth or inner logical structure of the image. The dichotomy between the general and the particular is collapsed. *Alison Lapper Pregnant* isn't a symbol of disability, and it isn't simply a representation of Lapper. It is a representation of a representation. Disability is a sort of platonic *form* that exists in the sculpture. It has a history and multiple manifestations.

What remains to be read? There is a chain of associations of representation and authorship through which one can contemplate and revisit the dialogue between discourses of aesthetics – the appreciation of the object – and representation – concern with the power, ownership and implications of the object. There's the montage of images of the spectacle that create a representation that is nobody, not even Alison Lapper, but which has made legible and publicly accessible debates about beauty and disability and public space. Then there is the dialogue of scale between the mobile flying, dancing and wheeling bodies and the great towering confluence of ideas. As a paradigm through which to think, or rather, to know disability, the giant balloon-statue serves us well.

In a sense, the Paralympic opening ceremony gave us a way of understanding disability as paradigm creatively and securely. At times too, there are close-ups of other parts of the vast picture – a pierced tongue on a singer, a *pas de deux* between two electric wheelchair users. Against the gloss and the spectacle are still moments of performance of the glorious and ordered staging of the disorderly bodies of disability. The ability to apply categories fails in the crowd.

As a subject of knowledge or an object for philosophy, disability is a very difficult notion. Any attempt to nail it down as a concept ends in disaster and argument. The communitarian use of the notion of disability ensures its paradigmatic structure. One cannot know disability, but one can *do* it. You know it when you see it, but you need to claim it in speech to speak about it. Myth appears to found a community: the process of exception is also a process of apparent and desired, but problematic, recognition.

The disabled artists of the Paralympic opening ceremony have self-identified, but in the performance there is no distinction made between disabled and non-disabled performers. When discussing this aspect of the opening ceremony in public, a disabled performer told me how crucial it had felt to the disabled dancers on the sway poles that they should have with them aspects of access equipment, such as canes, to signify and claim their identities as disabled people. This account of making disability visible, of claiming and performing disability for the individual in the crowd, seems both moving and important.²⁴

While the framework and the structure of the opening ceremony belong primarily to the global Paralympics, the artists have created a culture together through working accessibly. They have worked together culturally and artistically. They have learned the rich and complex series of exchanges and patterns that emerge and are negotiated in a disability cultural project – the example of a Deaf man lifting a wheelchair user – the way the two need to learn to communicate through touch and visual signal – the way that BSL interpreting works as a grammar in a rehearsal – the way that a recent amputee and a congenitally

disabled person may have a world of difference between their understandings of their own bodies and the way that others look at them.

For Nancy, community is formed in a ritualized moment of shared narrative, with storytelling and authority. The moment founds us as community through narrative. These Paralympic Games offered to found a community of spectators and athletes with notions of disability from every possible source, and stage them together. The ceremony is themed and entitled *Enlightenment* and it stages history as a story of progress from the Big Bang to Miranda from Shakespeare's *Tempest* shattering the glass ceiling with her crutch. The ceremony creates a moment of staging the individual within a grand narrative. Nancy writes: 'what community reveals to me, in presenting my birth and my death, is my existence outside myself'.²⁵ The final moments of the ceremony involve the singing and signing of the song 'I Am What I Am', simultaneously an expression of pride and self-acceptance, and also a tautological vacuum, an appropriate end point for the conclusion of the mythic narrative – 'Myth says what it says, and says that this is what it says.' The community of 'I' is always about to peel apart. The inclusion of disability in the account of human progress feels significant, places me in an agreeable fantasy of belonging, allowing me to read myself as a finite being within a universal frame. Yet the powerful structure of the narrative and its spectacular rendering peels epistemic disability away from the ceremony.

The optimistic utterance, the moment of jealousy and the recognition of the spectacle each create a subjective response to the event. They also found the process of writing, a notion that for Nancy properly founds community by assuming a community of readers, sharers of language, to whom there is desire to communicate and from whom there is a desire to understand, '[w]e would not write if our being were not shared', he says.²⁶

Nancy's paradox of myth helps me to think about the implications of these three experiences of texts as a single spectator. My initial uncertainty about the connections between my experience of sport and my experience of disability culture remains. I have used the three texts as readings through disability. They are attempts to lure the reader away from coherent disability identity, and away from ownership, similitude and politically collective action, although these are strategies that are manifested clearly and powerfully in any number of iterations of disability.

There is no possibility of assembling a whole body or a whole version of disability, and the contradictions and contestations shift from example to example, paradigmatically. There is, however, the act of staging political perspectives together, making disability flesh in this way and this way and this way: the act of making disability appear as artists, athletes, spectators and protesters. There is no political argument about the primacy of any one single model, but an association of examples, a way of knowing, all at one moment, the ways in which disability appears.

Notes

1. I am grateful to the Performance Identity Community working group of the Theatre and Performance Research Association for engaging in conversation about these ideas during a study day on 27 April 2013.

2. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. 48.
3. Rod Michalko, *The Difference That Disability Makes* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), p. 173–74.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 175.
5. Petra Kuppers, *Disability Culture and Community Performance: Find a Strange and Twisted Shape* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2011), p. 71.
6. See Kuppers, *Disability Culture* for a detailed articulation of this argument.
7. Nancy, *Inoperative Community*, p. 48.
8. Kuppers, *Disability Culture*, pp. 70–71.
9. Nancy, *Inoperative Community*, p. 57.
10. ‘Conservative Party Conference 2012 in Birmingham: Full transcript of David Cameron’s Speech’, *Independent*, 10 October 2012, <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/conservative-party-conference-2012-in-birmingham-full-transcript-of-david-camerons-speech-8205536.html>> [accessed 2 August 2013] (paras 45–46).
11. A study of changes to perceptions of disability was developed at Bournemouth University before, during and after the Games: ‘2012 Paralympics Changed People’s Perceptions of Disability and Disabled Sport, BU Study Finds’, *Bournemouth University News and Events*, 8 January 2013, <<http://www.bournemouth.ac.uk/newsandevents/News/2012/dec/ne11-paralympics-changed-perception-of-disability-BU-study.html>> [accessed 2 August 2013].
12. See, for example, Joanne Ryan and Frank Thomas, *The Politics of Mental Handicap* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), p. 101.
13. In the UK, The Work Capability Assessment is a process of re-assessing the impairments of all individuals who receive disability benefits. It has the stated intention of getting as many disabled people as possible out of the ‘benefit trap’ and into employment. The process has attracted fierce controversy. The UK Government Guidelines can be found here: <http://www.direct.gov.uk/prod_consum_dg/groups/dg_digitalassets/@dg/@en/@disabled/documents/digitalasset/dg_177366.pdf> [accessed 2 August 2013]; and a press report on the Work Capability Assessment in action here: Amelia Gentleman, ‘Benefits Assessment Firm Causing “Fear and Loathing” among Claimants, Says MP’, *Guardian*, 24 July 2011, <<http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2011/jul/24/atos-faces-critical-report-by-mps?guni=Article:in%20body%20link>> [accessed 2 August 2013].
14. For details of the protests against the Work Capability Assessments see ‘Atos Protest: Disability Rights Groups Target Firm’, *BBC News*, 31 August 2012, <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-19437785>> [accessed 2 August 2013].
15. I am very grateful to Jenny Sealey for talking to me in an interview on 6 November 2012.

16. Unlimited was a festival of D/deaf and disabled art that took place at the Southbank Centre, London from 30 August to 9 September 2012. 'London 2012: Disabled Artists Launch Unlimited Festival', *BBC News*, 10 July 2012, <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-18787268>> [accessed 2 August 2013].
17. Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou, *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), p. 76.
18. In this case, the impairment profile comes from the British Paratriathlon regulations. The full document can be found at: <http://www.triathlon.org/images/uploads/ITU_Paratriathlon_Classification_Rules_and_Regulations_2012.pdf> [accessed August 2013].
19. Associated Press, "'Enlightenment" Gala Opens London Paralympics', *CBC Sports*, 29 August 2012, <<http://www.cbc.ca/sports/story/2012/08/29/sp-paralympics-london-stephen-hawking-oscar-pistorius-denise-leigh-miranda-sebastian-coe.html>> [accessed 2 August 2013] (para. 6 of 32).
20. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 18.
21. Sigmund Freud, 'Psychopathic Stage Characters', in *Penguin Freud*, vol. 14 (London: Penguin, 1990), pp. 121–22.
22. James I. Charlton, *Nothing About Us Without Us: Disability Oppression and Empowerment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p. 3.
23. Giorgio Agamben, *The Signature of All Things: On Method* (New York: Zone Books, 2009), p. 18.
24. I am grateful to Amelia Cavallo for her comments about this aspect of the performance.
25. Nancy, *Inoperative Community*, p. 26.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 69.