

May Day and the Moon – Artists’ Reflections

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Abstract

“May Day and the Moon” is a playful audio exploration of childhood dreams of adult work. The storyteller, Grant Miller, is a non-binary queer disabled white person born with disabilities and having acquired disability later in life as well. Unlike mainstream disability-related stories, Grant never describes their disability nor names any diagnoses. This is done to invite audiences to trust the storyteller and to disinvite the possibility of an objectifying medical gaze. We approach the idea of work indirectly in a sound-rich audio story, challenging the standard interview format. Rather than overtly discuss unemployment, underemployment, and capitalism, the story focuses on the lack of disabled role models in the working world and lack of family encouragement to consider pursuing adult work. The story concludes with a celebration of the innovation and creativity that Grant has incorporated into their self-empowered, self-directed, joy-filled artistic life.

Keywords

Employment; work; disability identity; role models; disability art; self-empowerment

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²Grant Miller is a queer, white, Disabled artist. They move to de-form existing structures, co-create virtual worlds, and enact an ongoing anti-ableist praxis. Situated on the stolen and unceded lands of the Multnomah, Clackamas, and Kalapooya people —colonial name Portland, Oregon— their work includes solo performance, collaborative devised projects, and institutional change through accessibility initiatives.

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Grant and I sat down together to reflect on the process of making this audio story nearly a year after it was released. I audio recorded and then transcribed that conversation, and we present portions of it here. To begin, I asked us both to describe ourselves and our relationship to disability.

Introductions

CHERYL: I'm an independent media artist in video and audio, a Closed Captioner, a Transcriptionist, and an Audio Describer. My background is in Performance as Public Practice. My connection to disability is political, and I have acquired disabilities that are primarily invisible. I am a white, cis artist.

GRANT: Well, I do like my connection to disability. [laughs] I studied theater in school and continue to work in social practice as a performing artist. I do work with arts organizations to support accessibility initiatives and promote disability equity within institutions. I am about 5 feet tall with black and brown, wavy hair. I'm white with hazel eyes. I have hands that drape like willow trees, and my back arches like the edge of a mountain. I'm also a queer, non-binary artist.

CHERYL: I swooned. I have dark, long, curly brown hair and gray-green eyes with yellow sunflowers in the centers.

GRANT: I didn't describe disability! I was labeled disabled at birth and self-identify with physical disability and neurodiversity.

CHERYL: Oh, yeah! And I'm neurodivergent. [laughs] And one of my physical impairments I was born with, but it's just now catching up to me as I am entering middle age.

Inspiration and goals

CHERYL: I have been podcasting for about six years. A year and a half ago, I threw my long-form interview podcast away and started a whole new podcast. All the disability-specific podcasts I've found in the US and the UK are interview-based or talk show-based or documentary. I wanted to do something totally different, stories rich in sound design.

Jonathan [Grant's partner] at one point said to me, "Hey, Cheryl, did you know when Grant was a kid, they wanted to be the moon?" So, I said to you, "I have a question, and I wanna know if I can record you giving you the answer." I didn't wanna tell you what my question was.

GRANT: I think there's something about the radio story that feels like an example of a relational model of disability in the thread of Alison Kafer or Carmen Papalia, which is not this objective depiction of somebody's story. You're implicated in how I'm talking to you, but you're not actually speaking to me in the story. There's something about that blurry edge that I think feels a little crip.

CHERYL: I didn't set out to make a story about work. I just wanted to hear this whimsical story, and honestly, I only knew about the moon. The snowman was news. Once you started bringing stuff up about the family expectations, I realized this can become a message piece about barriers for disabled people to contribute to society in the ways that we have standardized through normative, non-disabled culture. And in the blog post, the show notes, I added a whole thing about May Day. Only after that, did I name the piece "May Day and the Moon!" [laughs] Well...maybe it was May. [laughs]

GRANT: It was released on May Day.

CHERYL: Was it?!

GRANT: Yes!

CHERYL: [laughs] Also, you and I are very motivated by the way Sunny Taylor talks about the right to be viewed as a complete human being who's contributing to society even if you don't work.

GRANT: I think there are ways I didn't fully acknowledge how I could be involved in culture and society because I was not given access to an image of myself as a working body. But a flip side is the right not to work should be a right that all people have, and disability is just a really useful lens of interpreting that possibility.

Non-crip feedback

CHERYL: I wanna bring up two pieces of feedback on the piece. One was someone who has training in journalism expressing appreciation that I deleted your diagnosis. And my response was, “I never asked Grant to say their diagnosis because of the political and crip aesthetic that both of us take.”

GRANT: How curious for them to assume you had asked my diagnosis and chose to remove it without implicating themselves and their own biases that asking somebody what their diagnosis is, is somehow unquestionable.

CHERYL: The other piece was a person who asked me your diagnosis after listening. I said, “We left it out because it’s not related to the story.” And this person said, “But I would’ve been able to picture the story better if I had known their diagnosis.” I said, “Even if you knew the name of any diagnosis, that doesn’t mean you actually know how they live in the world. I want the audience to trust Grant. I want you to believe Grant simply on the merit of them having said what they said.” People demand information all the time, but I don’t think it gets them the knowledge they think it does. They need to believe disabled people when they speak from their own truth.

GRANT: Thank you for sharing that. I might’ve said that they believe their own impressions about diagnoses more than they believe me, like they have more faith in the eugenic-rooted system that defines the medical-industrial complex more than they trust me. That’s also a deeply racialized attitude, that you can know specific things

about a person based off of the way that they're articulated through the medical-industrial complex.

CHERYL: It's like disability simulations: focusing just on physical or sensory or psychological or cognitive "limitations" doesn't tell you anything about the lived experience of the person or about ableism. Like any other aspect of somebody's life, one label, one phrase does not sum up you.

GRANT: And this idea that a person's physical or cognitive limitations are used as a basis for saying that a person a) doesn't have power, and b) that a person's limitations are just like the limitations everybody else has. There are people who are specifically oppressed and put through social barriers, pushed into poverty, pushed into criminalized institutions because of their disabilities, not because they have "limitations like everybody else." Framing a person's disability around their medical condition does create this sort of apolitical know-it-all-ism amongst people who think that they know a goddamn thing about me. [laughing] And they don't!

CHERYL: [laughs] They don't.

Grant, thank you so much for talking to me about the story.

GRANT: I was really excited you wanted to interview me! And thank you for talking again today.