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Oscar Pistorius and the melancholy of intersectionality

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CURRENT ISSUES

Oscar Pistorius and the melancholy of intersectionality

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The alleged shooting by Paralympian and Olympian athlete Oscar Pistorius of his girlfriend Reeva Steenkamp has led to strong reactions worldwide. Scholars in the field of disability studies have expressed shock and disappointment in response both to the death itself and to its implications for the representation of disability. In South Africa in the wake of the death of Ms Steenkamp, much has been made both by critics of Pistorius and by his defenders about his status as a white South African man, but little has been said about disability issues. This silence in South Africa about disability as a possible identity factor in this case draws attention to the extent to which disability questions remain profoundly raced and gendered, and influenced by the colonial and apartheid past. The tragic alleged shooting by Oscar Pistorius draws attention back to how important intersectionality is to understanding disability in South Africa and other unequal societies.

Keywords: Oscar Pistorius; intersectionality; disability; South Africa; apartheid; racism; representation; gender based violence; femicide; identity

On Valentine's Day 2013, Paralympian and Olympian athlete Oscar Pistorius allegedly shot his girlfriend, Reeva Steenkamp, at his home in Pretoria, South Africa. Pistorius argues that the event was a tragic accident; the state believes that this was a case of premeditated murder (IOL News 2013). Regardless of the facts of the matter and the outcome of the forthcoming trial, the case has attracted worldwide interest and concern.

Within the disability community, there have been many attempts to understand the meaning of this event from a disability perspective. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson writes eloquently about the conflict she feels in responding to the tragedy:

As a woman, mother of daughters, and feminist, I seethed with repugnance and outrage hearing that he'd shot Reeva Steenkamp four times, that he had a history of abusive incidents against women. As a person with a disability myself – in fact, a congenital limb reduction like Pistorius – I fear the links that may be made between disability and temperament. I can imagine speculation about Pistorius' grim history of abusing women being attributed to some kind of character flaw that parallels what the world takes to be the flaw we call disability. (Garland-Thomson 2013)

Positioning himself as a 'black crip feminist' and as a South African (although currently in Canada), Eddie Ndopu (2013) argues that the supercrip narrative takes

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agency away from Pistorius himself, positioning him instead as a cipher in a story of heroic overcoming of the odds (through the glorification of his sporting achievements), and now similarly a character in a tragic plot. In line with Ndopu's analysis, *Time* magazine ran a cover story on Pistorius (Perry 2013) with the headline 'Man/Superman/Gunman' superimposed on a photograph of Pistorius formerly used in a laudatory piece by Michael Sokolove in the *New York Times Magazine* in 2012. In the context of the *Time* magazine headline and the subtitle 'Oscar Pistorius and South Africa's culture of violence', the image of Pistorius intertextually evokes that of Arnold Schwarzenegger as the Terminator, a dangerous cyborg. Garland-Thomson has good grounds to worry that 'flawed' bodies like her own and that of Pistorius may come once again to be seen as signs of character deficiencies, an ascription no doubt exacerbated by Pistorius's own cyborg status (Swartz and Watermeyer 2008). Ndopu notes further, however, that another way in which Pistorius's agency is taken away from him discursively is by allusion to a supposedly ubiquitous 'culture of violence' in South Africa, into which Pistorius is inserted. In this discourse, Pistorius becomes a symptom of a broader South African malaise, defocusing from his own individual responsibility in allegedly killing another person (Ndopu 2013).

A noteworthy feature of the coverage of the shooting in South African media has been the relative lack of attention to issues of disability. The highest-level response to the shooting, apart from those in the justice system, came from the South African Minister of Women, Children, and Persons with Disabilities, the Hon. Lulu Xingwana, who has a portfolio responsibility to promote the rights of people with disabilities. In an interview with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, the minister said:

Young Afrikaner men are brought up in the Calvinist religion believing that they own a woman, they own a child, they own everything and therefore they can take that life because they own it. (SAPA 2013)

Both the minister and the Presidency apologized subsequently for this comment (SAPA 2013), but it is clear that the minister's statements positioned Pistorius as young, as a man, as a white Afrikaner, and as a Calvinist. She viewed these positionings as salient to his alleged role as a killer. The minister made no comment on another aspect of Pistorius's identity – that of his being a person with a disability.

Hot on the heels of this statement, Pistorius's father Henke Pistorius was asked by the London *Daily Telegraph* to comment on the fact that Pistorius's father, grandfather, and uncles own 55 guns between them. Henke Pistorius is quoted as having responded:

Some of the guns are for hunting and some are for protection, the hand guns. It speaks to the ANC government, look at white crime levels, why protection is so poor in this country, it's an aspect of our society. (Laing 2013).

Here, Henke Pistorius, wittingly or otherwise, reproduces two commonly-held beliefs. The first is that white South Africans are more likely to be victims of crime than are black South Africans (in fact the opposite is true – black people are more likely to be crime victims than are whites; see Silber and Geffen 2010). The second is that the ANC (predominantly black) government is fomenting violence against

whites – see, for example, White Genocide in South Africa (n.d.) – again, a view for which there is no real evidence. So, just as Minister Xingwana was propagating myths about white masculinity in South Africa, Henke Pistorius was also propagating myths about whiteness and blackness in South Africa – but neither mentioned issues of disability.

From a disability studies perspective, it may not be entirely facile to argue that this emphasis on race and gender rather than on disability in South African discussions about the Pistorius case shows the success of mainstreaming – Pistorius has become such a mainstream icon that his impairments seem irrelevant. There is another way, however, in which the case reveals rather than obscures some difficult realities about disability and intersectionality in South Africa.

Much contemporary writing on disability in South Africa presents the issue of the realization of the rights of disabled people in South Africa as linked with the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, in the context of the building of an inclusive democracy (Heap, Lorenzo, and Thomas 2009; Mji et al. 2011; Swartz 2012; Watermeyer et al. 2006). Howell, Chalklen, and Alberts (2006) present the history of disability rights in South Africa as inextricably bound up with other struggles for human rights (including rights to racial equality), a view that is echoed by the South African Human Rights Commission (2002). This view of disability as a broader democracy issue in South Africa is correct, but it defocuses from some uncomfortable South African realities, amongst which are the following:

- (1) White athletes are substantially over-represented in South Africa's Paralympic team (as they are in the South African Olympic team).
- (2) One of the key reasons why South Africa, almost uniquely on the South African continent, provides social security in the form of cash transfers for disabled people, whereas there is no general unemployment or poverty grant in South Africa, is that initially under apartheid disability grants were designed to support the interests of white disabled people (Swartz and Schneider 2006).
- (3) Some of the best and most sophisticated educational facilities for disabled people in South Africa, although now non-racial, were for whites only (Howell 2006; Soudien and Baxen 2006). It probably remains the case that in general white disabled students have better access to education than do black disabled students.
- (4) White disabled South Africans are far more likely to be employed than are black disabled South Africans (Schneider and l'Papi'Nkoli 2011).

The history of provision of services for disabled people in South Africa, as is true for all other aspects of South African life, is saturated with issues of racial inclusion and exclusion, privilege and oppression. Black disabled South Africans have historically been shamefully excluded from a range of services and opportunities, and amongst the best services and examples of inclusion and achievement for and by disabled South Africans are built on a platform of racial oppression. It was part of the colonial and apartheid project to provide services to whites – including disabled whites – in order to ensure them a standard of living better than that of their black counterparts (Hook 2012).

There is something distasteful and even macabre in the attempt to draw lessons from the violent death of any person. But the shooting of Reeve Steenkamp allegedly

by her white South African male partner with a disability, and some of the subsequent South African debates about this tragedy, force those interested in disability rights to confront issues of intersectionality and privilege as they relate to the experience of disability in South Africa. Much of the writing about disability in South Africa in light of the recognition of disability as a human rights issue in Africa is justifiably proud in tone. The Pistorius/Steenkamp tragedy and its aftermath may temper that tone to a degree. South Africa has come a long way in terms of disability rights. Perhaps it is time to explore South Africa's complex and continuing racial and disability history more critically in order to build a movement on firmer ground, and less prone to the fissures we have seen in light of the Pistorius case.

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