

The Veil Lifted
Inclusive Improvisation, Virtual Music Learning Environments,
and the Pandemic that Unwittingly Pitted Academia Against
Ableism

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Article abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted many disparities between diverse social and cultural groups, both inside the academy and throughout society at large. In this essay, Erica K. Argyropoulos reflects on her own experiences as a disabled, nonbinary person in academia during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Veil Lifted: Inclusive Improvisation, Virtual Music Learning Environments, and the Pandemic that Unwittingly Pitted Academia Against Ableism

Erica K. Argyropoulos

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted many disparities between disparate social and cultural groups, both inside the academy and throughout society at large. As we face this crisis in our own ways and with our own fears, marginalized groups have found themselves on common ground despite their many differences. In this essay, I reflect on my own experiences as a disabled, nonbinary person in academia during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In his early intersectional masterpiece, *The Souls of Black Folk*, ground-breaking sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois captures his experience as a Black man in the academy, the American South, the United States, and the world at large. He articulates an existence that resonates across the cold and lonely expanse of both time and identity, capturing a feeling shared in some manner by all disenfranchised groups. Du Bois understood “the veil” of difference and its vast implications by means of his own experience, but his words resonate for many marginalized groups who have always occupied the periphery of dominant cultures:

Between me and the world there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of framing it. All, nevertheless, flutter around . . . the real question, How does it feel to be a problem? And yet, being a problem is a strange experience . . . It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. (Du Bois)

I categorically reject hijacking Du Bois’s profound testament regarding his deeply personal experience of Black identity in the age of Jim Crow, and his marginalization within the academy. However, the intersections of racism, toxic masculinity, sexism, ableism and queer aversion explored in his work formed the tenets of his Atlanta School of sociology where Du Bois sought diverse students of colour and women/gender minorities. Historically, ableism and racism have intersected with one another in a variety of ways. In the eugenics movement of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, disgraceful pseudoscientific practices such as phrenology sought to situate disabled white people, and *all* people of colour, as inferior to white-abled bodies. Although eugenics did impact white people with disabilities, it cast all people of colour as feebleminded, mad, or disabled, deeming them useful only in so far as they could provide labour capital.

As a disabled, nonbinary white woman over a century removed from the quote above, I am doubly marginalized; I do not conform to traditional female norms within and outside the academy, and Du Bois’s words (related to alienation within the academy) resonated on a profound spiritual level from the moment I read them. They gave voice to a feeling I had not yet formed into a coherent statement. Yet I have long understood on a visceral level the cold, detached experience of being regarded as a curiosity or object of pity at best, and at worst, a problem—a person needing accommodation, which is often administered begrudgingly. Perhaps, to put it more accurately, I am forced into accommodating ableism and abled people, rather than existing simply as a human who deserves to live unhampered in the spaces I navigate.

Like many other marginalized communities, disabled persons are judged by a yardstick in which intelligence, resilience, and success are considered remarkable when they exist in a neurodivergent mind or body that society deems broken. Du Bois's central question is never posed explicitly, yet a curiosity lingers in the air for many well-meaning people with whom I engage, at least as I am seen through their eyes: "How does it feel to be a problem?" These condescending microaggressions serve no purpose but to make the feeling of being "problematic" all the more palpable for those of us who are in any way different, even when we know it is society that is broken and not our bodies or minds. Something resembling Du Bois's double-consciousness—that feeling of irrelevance and invisibility vis-à-vis some unachievable gold standard of humanity—creeps in each time I am reminded that my own identity exists for many merely as something to be compared to a norm of "somebodyness" out of my reach as the occupant of a "defective" body. In *Authoring Autism: On Rhetoric and Neurological Queerness*, Melanie Yergeau uses the term "demi-rhetoricity" to refer to the ways in which assumptions about autistic people's rhetorical abilities have been used by dominant society to deny their agency and humanity. Similarly, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's scholarship on the cultural logic of euthanasia further underscores the degradation of bodies to objects in the cultural collective and the ways in which disabled bodies are controlled by late capitalist ideology. Otherness is an experience that is traumatic, forcibly inflicted, and ultimately inescapable. However invisible, ill-defined, or fantastical are the social constructs by which I am judged, they cannot be disregarded or discarded by myself or anyone else, for they become a fact of life.

Unlike the privileged dominant culture, we continue to be viewed as acceptable "collateral damage" for the sake of the economy: a disturbing reality driven home time and again by policy decisions made at every level of government and upheld by many a University President after a suitable period to provide the optics of concern has passed. Further, COVID-19 has laid bare before the world the disparities of the US healthcare system: namely, the privileging of white, male, and abled American-born citizens with enough education or training to hold a job with insurance benefits and telecommuting privileges. This is to say nothing of discrimination in access to lifesaving care, or indeed to any care at all—the likelihood of receiving a far more attentive response from a medical professional when not carrying the added baggage of being poor, non-heterosexual, transgender, stamped with a stigmatizing mental and/or physical diagnosis, or being judged as "overly emotional" or "aggressive" by the standards of toxic masculinity, systemic ableism, and white supremacy. Indeed, preconceived judgments impacting quality of healthcare are casually and frequently passed for the medical heresy of not being white, not being a man, not conforming to heteronormative expectations, not holding an insurance policy or formal identification, or simply daring to stand out in just about any conceivable way from the conformity of the masses.

In education, as in all fields, the nature of these times also demands that novel solutions be adopted to meet societal demands. The economy and medical community drew upon the cultural fruits of an era of technological and informational capital unimaginable during the last global pandemic a century before. As a librarian and musicologist in academia, the learning curve felt steep and generationally divided, yet collaborative. Minds across the academy came together to hammer out increasingly workable solutions, as did experts among and across other industries. While there is no question that I was more immediately aware of and preoccupied with the painful disparities described above, easily anticipatable by means of the sociology of disaster and well-established patterns of personal experience, I was far less prepared for the flip side to these glaring inequalities. Boundaries had faded, and improvisation and experimentation became welcome tools. Such circumstances ultimately posed an entirely unexpected question and even more, the start of an answer: how does it feel to *not* be a problem?

Since the pandemic, I have telecommuted as a music librarian, part-time professor, and music scholar. I have also been involved both as a participant and organizer in a number of conferences. One thing is clear across the whole of these experiences: improvisation has been key to successful online learning and discourse. Virtual learning environments require fluidity of approaches, for sometimes technology does not work as we expect—whether that be for the meeting host, facilitator, or the participants. Similarly, all of our backgrounds differ substantially in relation to our experience with these tools. Each learning session also has its own means of unfolding, with some utilizing certain methods of engagement or being more or less interactive in nature. As we test various approaches, however uncomfortable some of us may feel with a given tool, we continue to show up to the table and seek solutions and to foster positive learning experiences, as evidenced by bountiful conference offerings and new flexible approaches to university operations. This crisis has given us no choice but to adapt.

Why are academics so willing to improvise with new teaching approaches today? Why are we only now exploring the depths of digital learning, even as many of our schools have long been offering fully online programs? I suspect the answer lies largely in the concept of “beginner’s mind,” a term from Zen Buddhism that denotes approaching a task without allowing the ego to be hampered by preconceived ideas, opening us up to a *tabula rasa* that nurtures ingenuity as well as an improvisatory mindset—by nature more inclusive of diversity. Beginner’s mind is of paramount importance in contemplative pedagogy, but the strictures of academic culture do not lead us to apply such a methodology naturally without already being invested in doing so. The pandemic has pushed academics to adopt a beginner’s mind to flourish as we see rigidly structured methodologies through new eyes and hold space for novel experiential approaches. Musical improvisation flourishes in a flow state and thrives on mindful engagement with creativity and a dynamic shared experience of musicians who may have very different backgrounds and experiences. Successful learning environments operate in the same manner. When improvisation and a beginner’s mind became vital to the survival of our profession, the natural outgrowth was engaging more effectively with diverse students and colleagues.

We often hear the word “tradition” spoken in academia as though it were sacrosanct and immutable: the traditions of higher education, of our university or a scholarly organization, or those one must follow to achieve tenure or promotion. Unfortunately, the subtext in adhering to such traditions is that we are discouraged from breaking from the fold. We are discouraged from speaking our truth lest we upset time-honored customs and reveal disturbing truths to those who would prefer willful ignorance. The pandemic has upset our routines and allowed space for a new understanding of education as a phenomenology unfolding across time and space. The flexibility of virtual learning spaces also breaks through the physical and socio-economic barriers that have contributed to systemic ableism, racism, and the general exclusion of all marginalized groups, who are far more likely to face inequalities in income, health outcomes, and in traditional academic spaces.

Living and thriving with a disability requires an improvisatory approach to life and an element of flow. Sometimes, it means adopting a beginner’s mind to relearn new methods—that require effort and money—of doing daily tasks that our able-centered culture take for granted. For the first time in my life, even as the pandemic has necessitated that I be far more careful about moving through public spaces, I feel far more freedom as I exist inconspicuously in the new virtual spaces of my profession. I no longer have to choose between the cost of an overnight trip out of my rural college town to see the medical specialist I require, or hotel and airfare to present my research on a wider stage—to say nothing of the physical tolls such travels also take on me. I no longer have to settle for choosing one form of participation in my field because it is all I am likely to have funded and therefore be able to afford (due to oppressive medical

expenses). If I am not steady on my feet or am unable to drive several hours to a regional board meeting or event, I can now make my way into my home office and I will be seated while speaking. I can exist in space just as everyone else, without announcing my conditions. For the first time in my life, I am just another academic in virtual space, no longer improvising alone.

As in any instance where systemic failures are forced into the light of day, public awareness and discourse on these issues has brought some hope and the small comfort of validation. Moreover, we can have the greater audacity to hope that, when combined with a situation unprecedented in our lifetimes, such awareness could serve as a vehicle for much-needed change; indeed, the protests against police brutality in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd and so many others prove that such crises can catalyze public awareness and sweeping demands for change. As we fight for the rights of the disenfranchised and act to decolonize the academy, we must choose to live our values rather than succumb to the irresistible pressure to cling to traditions that by their very nature exclude valued colleagues and diverse voices, and often dissuade marginalized persons from entering our profession altogether. We must be willing to improvise.

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