



The Kennedy Center

OPENING STAGES

**A Quarterly Newsletter for People with Disabilities Pursuing Careers in the
Performing Arts**

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PEOPLE

SIMI LINTON, PH.D.

AUTHOR, PROFESSOR, ARTS CONSULTANT

Interviewed by Paul Kahn

(Editor's note: When we published this interview in the last issue of Opening Stages some words crept in that didn't accurately reflect Ms. Linton's style or intent. Therefore, we are republishing it here.)

KAHN: What is your doctorate in?

LINTON: It's in psychology.

KAHN: Were you a practicing psychologist at one time?

LINTON: I trained to do clinical work, but when I completed my doctorate I made the decision that I really liked to teach. I taught at Hunter College and Baruch College for about 14 years. Both are part of the City University of New York. I taught courses in psychology for many years. In the last several years that I taught there I developed a course in disability studies. I had a year sabbatical and I had a fellowship, which is when I wrote my first book called *Claiming*

Disability: Knowledge and Identity. It was a basic overview of the field of disability studies and its history. It's used in the academic curriculum.

KAHN: Do you have academic positions now?

LINTON: I left Hunter College in 1998 to be an independent scholar and to be a consultant to arts organizations. I'm on the lecture circuit a great deal. I go to colleges and universities to talk about disability studies and about disability and the arts. Currently I am co-director of the disability studies seminar at Columbia University.

KAHN: And you have a new book?

LINTON: It's a memoir -- just out, actually last week. It's called *My Body Politic*. In essence it's the story of my life. But it is more specifically the story of the ways that our ideas about disability have shifted over time, and how that shift influenced the way I saw my own disability. I grew into the identity of "disabled woman," which is now how I primarily identify myself, but that wasn't always the case. I entered the state of disability at age 23. I didn't really identify myself as a disabled woman for many, many years. It took my alliance with the disability community, the growth of the disability rights movement and the growth of the idea of disability for me to gravitate to that identity and to claim it.

KAHN: Can I ask what your disability is?

LINTON: I have spinal cord injury due to an automobile accident in 1971.

KAHN: Your timing was pretty good because it was in the early 70s when the disability rights movement really started to take hold.

LINTON: Right.

KAHN: Have the arts figured in claiming your identity as a disabled woman?

LINTON: I think the arts figure very much in my life. We can express through the arts the various aspects of our experience and make apparent the things that are hidden, socially hidden. I think we can use the arts as a way to excite people about some of the ideas about disability that are increasingly part of our vocabulary and our way of talking about our experience.

KAHN: Tell me a little more about that.

LINTON: For instance, theater. Through theater there are ways to put ideas and issues out in a way that makes them interesting to people and makes it possible for non-disabled people or outsiders to the disability experience to grasp some of

what we've been putting out about the social construction of disability, about social justice issues, about the civil rights issues that so much shape our lives. The arts can be used to counter the medical ideas about disability that dominated our discourse for a long time.

KAHN: Do you think we can manifest a culture analogous to the creative output of other minorities? I'm thinking, for instance, of the rich expression coming out of the AIDS experience or the Black American experience.

LINTON: First of all, I think the cultural production that focuses on AIDS is part of the disability narrative. I am asked sometimes whether there is such a thing as a disability culture, and indeed, I think there is. I think it's not as well known. People with disabilities haven't been given the kind of creative opportunities to explore the many ways that disability can be expressed through the arts. I think that often, when disabled people make art, it's considered therapeutic. Or, it's seen as part of rehabilitation for our troubled lives, rather than a creative expression that has merit, that has excitement informed by ideas, by cultural experience and by community. The African-American experience is analogous but not the same.

KAHN: African-Americans and people with disabilities are both oppressed minorities. I always wonder why artistic expressions of the disability experience haven't attained the same level of significance or reception in the broader culture, yet we have so much to communicate that is universal.

LINTON: Well, we have had very little control over the way our experience has been described in the press, in cultural criticism and even in scholarship. So, I think we need to seize control over those images, and I think very slowly, we are getting some foothold in the way that we are talked about in the press and ideas being put forth in films and theater and in writing. Some days I'm optimistic, and some days, I think we haven't moved the world an inch. But I think this is a critical time. I think this coming year or two will show a critical change.

KAHN: What do you think will be responsible for that change?

LINTON: There are a few things going on. Maybe they don't amount to a hill of beans, but maybe they mean something. Let me see if I can think of all of them. Since the movie *Murderball* came out I've noticed a slight shift in attitude, in language and ideas in the papers. In the reviews of *Murderball* and some of the subsequent cultural criticism about disability stuff the critics seem to a little bit more on their toes.

KAHN: What I've noticed about the reviews of *Murderball* is that the critics have sort of got it. It's like a revelation to them: "These are regular guys."

LINTON: Exactly. So, I think that really helped. Then Chicago is having a disability and cultural arts weeklong, citywide event, involving many different venues and sectors of the cultural community. That's very exciting. The Theater Initiative that we are working on in New York has gotten a wonderful response from the New York theater community. We've been very excited about that. And we have others in the works that we are planning. The New York theater community seems interested, seems to know that this is worthwhile. And we have a number of wonderful disabled artists who are getting a little more attention. Some casting decisions in movies and in plays are giving more opportunities to disabled actors. And some of the playwrights that I cherish are getting recognition and getting productions.

I think it's slow. It's not going to be tomorrow, but there are going to be some shifts. I also think the huge number of returning disabled Iraqi vets are going to constitute an entity and a force in the same way disabled vets coming back from Vietnam participated in the genesis of a disability rights movement. Please don't get me wrong. I know the realities. I know how horrible it is. I know the unemployment rates. I know the amount of homelessness. I know the amount of disregard. I know the number of disabled people incarcerated in facilities. I'm not whitewashing that. I, in no way, think we are home free. I'm just saying I think there are some cultural shifts that are important to emphasize, and I think we have an opportunity to do that. I am looking at every opportunity I can to take disability public and make some of these things happen.

KAHN: Let me ask you about your organization, Disability/Arts. How did you come to found it and what does it do?

LINTON: Disability/Arts is basically me. It's not like you come to an office, and you see a bunch of us here. I do consulting with some arts organizations and theater projects. I formed Disability/Arts when I left my academic position in order to have an umbrella under which to do my work and to collaborate with other organizations. But within Disability/Arts, we were able to co-produce these disability theater events this year, along with the Columbia seminar in disability studies and the Non-Traditional Casting Project.

KAHN: Tell me a little about the events that happened this past year in New York.

LINTON: In the spring we did one event at Columbia University as part of a seminar on disability and theater. And it was, I think, quite successful. And then at the end everyone said, "This is just the beginning. We have to do more." So, we created two events for November. One was at the Public Theater, which was by invitation only. We invited significant figures in the New York theater

community to come together with playwrights and actors and other disabled people who pursue the idea of disability in their work—John Belluso, Susan Nussbaum, Lynn Manning, Troy Kotsur and Carrie Sandahl, who is a professor at Florida State in the theater department. So, it was a robust panel. And in our audience we had New York theater people who were really enormously enthusiastic. And we had a write up in *American Theatre Magazine*. And, based on that, we have been asked to do a couple more events, which until they're in better shape I can't really talk about.

KAHN: Do you have an artistic practice yourself?

LINTON: Well, writing. In writing the memoir I used the opportunity to explore a more creative kind of writing than I had done in the past, and I enjoyed that very much. I do paint on weekends, but I'm hardly a painter.

KAHN: It sounds like you think this may be a good time to be an artist with a disability.

LINTON: Well, I think that schools cannot reject disabled people as easily as they used to. I don't mean that it doesn't still happen, but I think there are more training schools and conservatories and colleges and universities that have theater programs and film and acting programs and painting programs and so forth. We've made it harder for them to reject disabled people. That is a positive thing. I think that high schools and elementary schools are still suffering enormously, particularly in city schools, from cutbacks in funding to the arts, and that affects both disabled and non-disabled people. Although, I think there are more restricted opportunities for disabled kids to explore artistic expression in really creative ways, not just through therapeutic endeavors, than there are for non-disabled kids. But I can't really document that.

KAHN: The arts are a hugely difficult field for anybody, full of rejection. What would you say to artists with disabilities who are feeling really discouraged because they can't get their work out and don't have opportunities?

LINTON: I don't want to give simple kinds of encouragement that are empty. I think that we have to work simultaneously, that all of us have to work as a community to seize better control over cultural criticism, to keep working at issues of equity and finding ways to communicate our messages, ways in which we do not compromise our messages but which are theatrically important and interesting in and of themselves. I don't have words of wisdom or anything like that, except that we have to work together at breaking down the barriers.