

nation-state, I suggest enables us to begin to raise the question, in meaningful and productive ways, of what it actually means to speak about 'decolonial Jewish practices'.

Note

1. It is important to recognize that the film was made 11 years before Poland passed its shameless 'Holocaust Law' in 2018. The legislation criminalizes any mention of Poles 'being responsible or complicit in the Nazi crimes committed by the Third German Reich'. The harshest penalties are reserved for those who refer to Nazi-era concentration camps such as Auschwitz as 'Polish death camps'. It is doubtful that the film could have been made after 2018.

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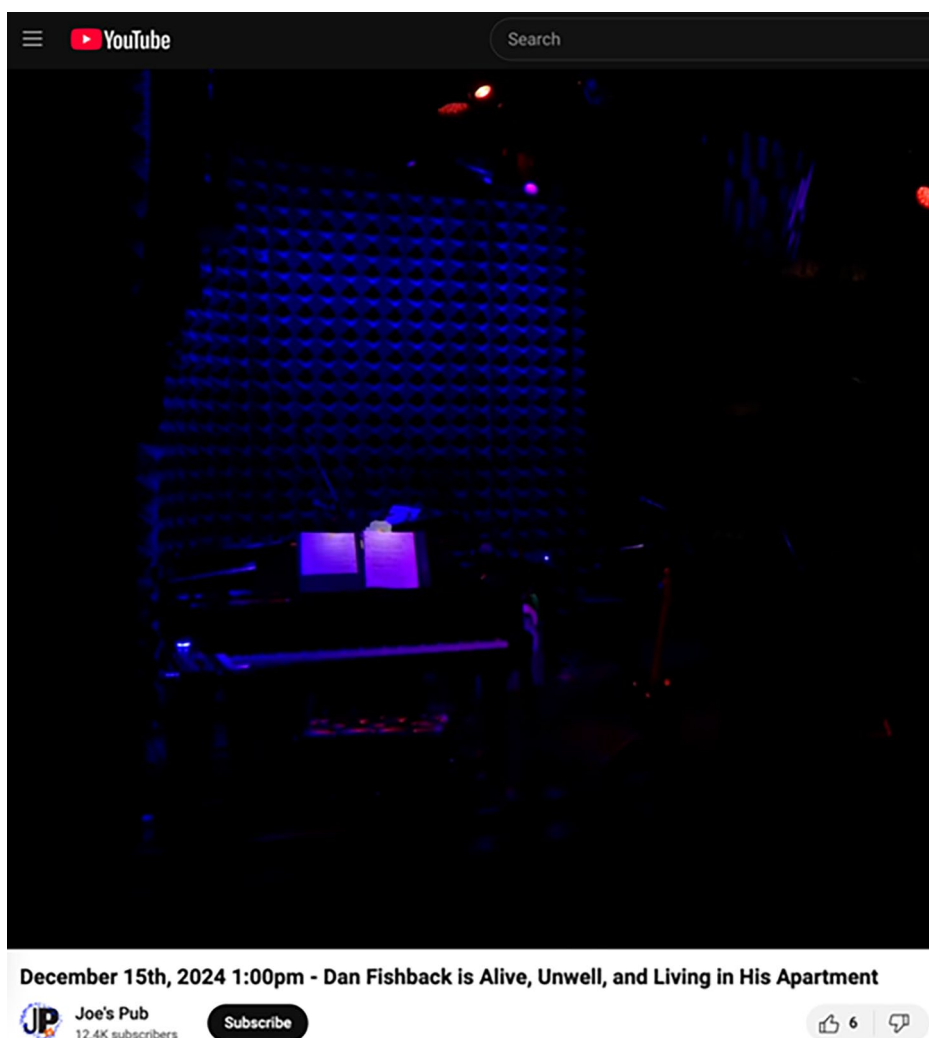
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Windows for Witness: Dan Fishback's Radical Access¹

Alexandra Juhasz

Brooklyn College, CUNY, New York, USA

I attended *Dan Fishback is Alive, Well, and Living in His Apartment* from a chaise lounge in my living room in Flatbush, Brooklyn on 15 December 2024. From there, I could see the show on my laptop screen and, also, to my right, my entire apartment (it's a floor-through) and, to my left, my busy sidewalk, some trees still holding orange leaves. On YouTube, I saw that 627 watched

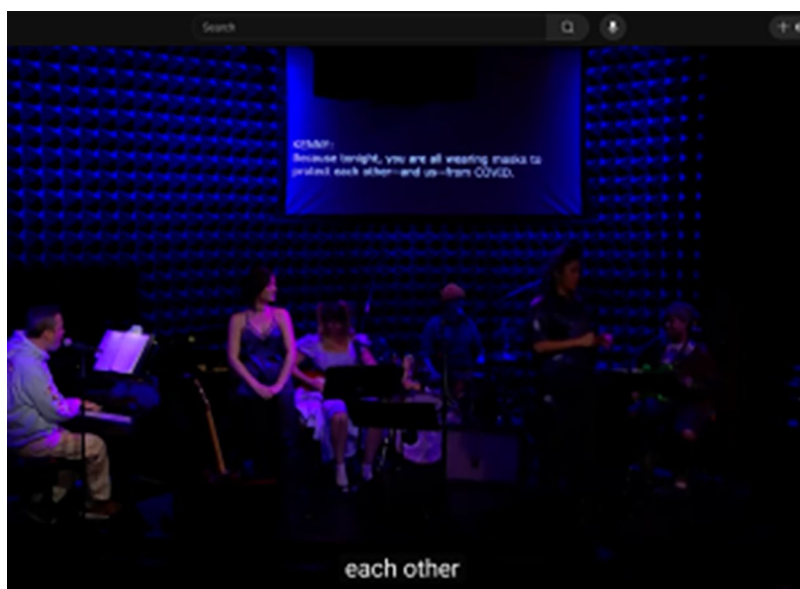


Dan Fishback is Alive, Unwell, and Living in His Apartment (Joe's Pub).

with me. A crowd also convened in person at Joe's Pub, in NYC. There were protocols of COVID mitigation organizing that space: masks were required, no food or drink was served.

From my private perch – captured in the screen grab above – I saw the performers enter the stage. They spent some time introducing each other: the artists' various roles (piano, ASL sign language, guitar, and so on), their physical appearances, pronouns and, less commonly perhaps, vivid and artful character attributes written as part of the show's script by performance artist and playwright Dan Fishback. These were sweet, creative, and funny.

Dan Fishback is Alive, Unwell, and Living in His Apartment is a rock musical theater song cycle about a chronically ill gay bitch trapped at home during



Dan Fishback is Alive, Unwell, and Living in His Apartment (Joe's Pub) – each other.

a time of global fascism and a mass-disabling pandemic, wondering how to spend the rest of his life living in a nightmare – performed twice in December 2024, online and in person (Fishback).

The tender, playful, raucous, and angry show draws out the dark contours of this nightmare: a constellation of pain and despair borne from chronic illness and genocide; *just like the flu but other people*, as I was informed, strangely but also poetically by AI-generated captions on YouTube.

These eerie words were only one of many streams of information available on my laptop. I could hear in-person audience response, sung lyrics, music played by musicians, and audio-description. I could see even more: sign-language, closed-captions, KENNY: *But other people seated around you are immunocompromised*, performances, as well as the captions.

Making space on stage and screen for these many streams, and the access needs they address, takes time and makes the performance about its themes, including its own forms and formats: illness, liveness, presence, absence, performance, screens, watching, participating, the audience, the audiences, the flu, and so on. According to Alison Kopit, the show's access dramaturg,² integrated access 'is creatively structured into the core of the show and is tied to the show's values and purpose' (Fishback, 2024).

Fishback is Alive and Well's values and purpose also include honoring the lives of Palestinians and questioning the roles of Jews in their destruction. In an interview with me a month later, also over Zoom, Dan explained:



Dan Fishback is Alive, Unwell, and Living in His Apartment (Joe's Pub) – just like the flu but other people.

It was the Fall of 2023, and I was in a daily panic, as many of us were, asking ourselves, 'What are the ways that I can exert power right now?' Because a genocide was accelerating, and consent was being manufactured. My body felt like it was on fire, taken over by the images and the video feeds of the genocide unfolding in front of me. I had to ask myself, 'How am I going to make good on my commitment to write a show that is largely about my own illness, while also engaging with this?' I relied on the tools Deb Margolin gave me, which are old Split Britches tools. If you're obsessed with more than one thing at the same time, they're connected. It's just a matter of juxtaposing them and finding out what the connection is. In this case, the overlap was alienation.

COVID and Palestine are two situations where the government and all of our major institutions are saying, 'Everything's fine. No need to get worked up. You don't have to act.' And in both situations, I know that nothing's fine, even though the rest of the world is just going about their business. It's just such a profoundly alienating experience.

The slaughter of human beings in Palestine has been represented on social media in ways that none of us have ever experienced: real time, from the perspective of the terrorized, at scale. Meanwhile, the experience of the chronically ill, the disabled, those who are caring for people who are homebound and must honor the needs and limits of the immunocompromised,

these people are all but invisible, absented from all the places they no longer frequent: meetings, shows, protests. Too visible, invisible, Fishback uses protocols for access as a crip aesthetics of perceptibility and connection. This is solidarity for all, including the dead.



Dan Fishback is Alive, Unwell, and Living in His Apartment (Joe's Pub) – living spirit onto the stage.

Alive and at home, I was taking screengrabs, trying to capture the *living spirit onto the stage* for myself and for you. We don't need to see each other to feel each other (Juhasz, 2024c). We can imagine – we can know – we are (a)live and aligned when we meet on a page or a screen to listen. These are prostheses for physical presence, windows for witness.

I took the screenshot above, excitedly, when at last, 'Dan' enters Joe's Pub, 'flying in' from his bed in Brooklyn. He is so happy to be here, KENNY: *his eyes light up as he beholds the audience*. But . . . he is an avatar, another access practice. Ron Shalom plays Dan who is too sick to be there/here. I realized that Dan, like me, was watching from Brooklyn and can't be seen. This makes me sad. And it is also intriguing; a strange mirror on my own virtual attendance (Juhasz, 2024b). However, unlike the sick mirror of social media, this window feels comforting, or at least honest. More like witnessing than amassing.

I am moved by Dan's ambivalence about social media as a prosthetic for presence. I am stretched to understand how our online embrace – audience and performer – off-screen/on-screen is a spiritual practice (Juhasz, 2024a). *Couldn't you use that to go viral or something?*

Dan, and sick people like him, have been essentially *Uninvited* from performance venues because of their ME/CFS and related caution around COVID (#MEAAction).

Dan Fishback is Alive, Unwell, and Living in His Apartment (Joe's Pub) – sick people like him, have been essentially *Uninvited* from performance venues.



Dan Fishback is Alive, Unwell, and Living in His Apartment (Joe's Pub) – KENNY: his eyes light up as he beholds the audience.

At this moment, a simple drawing of a window enters projection screen top right (a hat tip to mine), and a Dan cartoon enters the projection screen bottom left (a nod to me, and all the others), our spectral presence.

Dan, and other disabled, chronically ill performance artists, and their allies, have been organizing to be seen, and to work, and more so to express



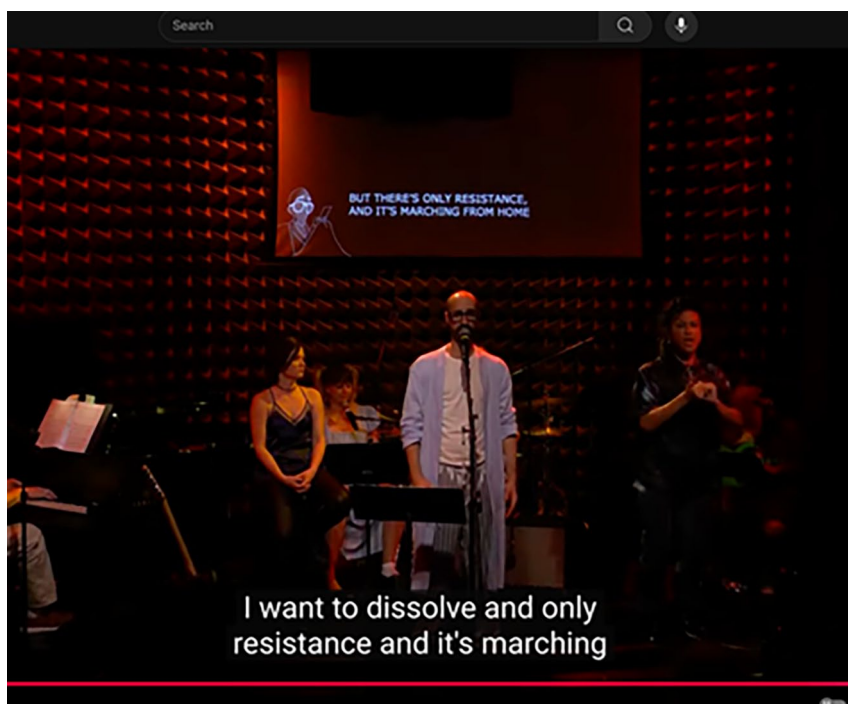


how abandoning the ill, the old, the sick, the weak, the children, the non-combatants is immoral and apolitical.³

I want to dissolve and only resistance and its marching alter pain but the process of staging this show

Dan, I have witnessed your pain – physical, existential, political – and your show. I can't see you, but I hear you. I remember that I was with you, not marching, but sitting (you told me how the most ingenious fold-out stool was made available for disabled people by JVP, and you had reserved one in advance. You remarked, 'Another way that the Palestine solidarity world is ahead of the game on disability justice'). We were together as activists and congregants with so many at the Emergency Seder in the Streets at Grand Army Plaza, on 23 April 2024 (*Jews for Racial & Economic Justice*). When I had COVID for the second time, just a few months later, I suffered from debilitating PEM (Post-Exertion Malaise) for about two weeks. I often thought about that chair, but more so your courage and your stupefying strength, to get to that Seder when it must have been almost physically impossible. You end your show saying: 'I suspect that care is where hope begins.'

And that's also where you start, Dan, something like: 'I'm going to speak as someone with an illness many of you haven't heard of and don't care about.' 'I'm going to speak as a leftist progressive Jew.' Another perspective that somehow, every time you say, 'I'm that person', people are like, 'there's a person like that in the world?'



Dan, I conjure you here on the page: that very person, one much like me, a non-Zionist, currently healthy, yet heartsick Jew. What would you say to an even larger audience, one of many open-hearted Jewish, disabled, chronically ill others whom we know exist?

This is a very sad question. This show is about feeling brutally ejected from various forms of community: the community of humans, the community of gay men, and the community of at-large Jews. The penultimate song of my show is called 'The Story'. It's about feeling, your whole life, that you are participating in writing the story of the Jewish people. We're people who understand ourselves through self-narration. In the absence of land, we replace land with language. And I understand myself as a certain kind of justice-seeking Jew who predates me, part of a long story. So to see Jews at large take such a hard pivot into cruelty and uncaring violence – not just violence, but worse, just this sort of passive acceptance – after everything I've been taught, this is a betrayal that I will never get over. People are always saying that you and me, people like us, have betrayed the Jewish people.

It's the other way around. Zionist Jews have betrayed us.

And, in the context of the show, it's just another ejection. But people who have been uninvited from the world still belong in the world. And accommodations must be made, even if they seem ridiculous, like making sure there's seven people on the stage for the seven lower realms of the sephirot, so that we can do this made-up kabbalistic ritual that I invented in order to summon my spirit into another living person. It's worth it, to re-invite someone who has been uninvited.

And I staged a community of people who were willing to be in solidarity with me, to prove that it's worth it.

Dan Fishback's Jewish crip aesthetic – art made with a framework of disability justice, anti-Zionism, and integrated access – is rooted in the human (or Jewish!) capacity to be generous and so much more. He expands our understandings of who is in the room, who is in the world, who is in our community, who lives at the same time as us but in a different way. This connection in his show between chronic illness and Palestine is not only about alienation it is about identification and solidarity.⁴

Notes

1. This brief essay is comprised of edited efforts rendered first as a real-time writing practice on my blog, during the interval between election and inauguration (November 2024–January 2025), and from an interview I conducted with Dan Fishback in connection to themes raised on the blog: audience, the digital, community, and more. See: <https://aljean.wordpress.com>
2. For more on access dramaturgy, see: <https://howlround.com/introducing-access-dramaturgy>
3. Several years earlier, Dan and I worked with others to create the 'Practicing Inclusion in the Time of COVID' campaign. See Strategies for High Impact (nd) Practicing Inclusion in the Time of COVID: A brief guide for gatherings and call for disability solidarity, created in partnership with 'What Would an HIV Doula Do?'
4. For more on the connections between illness and Palestine, see: 'WE REMIND YOU / HIV & PALESTINE,' co-authored by What Would an HIV Doula Do? collective.

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A Canary's Story

Laura Raicovich

Writer and curator, New York, USA

I don't tell this story often, and have never told it in such detail publicly before.¹ However, given our current moment of crisis in the US, only a few weeks into the second Trump Administration, it seems an important story to tell. It is a set of experiences that were horrible to live through and yet, I would not be the person I am today had they not happened. Ultimately, the story is about power, leverage, and fear, and also about the potential for solidarity and love.

When Donald Trump was elected President in November 2016, I had been the director of New York's Queens Museum for less than a year. Even in those early months, it was clear that the rhetoric and policies he, his campaign, and administration were promoting presented material threats not only to the populations who interacted with the museum most regularly, but also to many members of the team. As we gathered the morning after the election at our regular 9 am staff meeting, many of us with tears in our eyes, we recognized