Refusing Able(ness): A Preliminary Conversation about Ableism

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Feminist Rosemary Tong long ago alluded to the profound possibilities of using critical disability studies theory to recomprenhend and respatialize the landscape of thinking about race and gender as sites of signification. This piece presents a preliminary conversation in the emergent field of studies in ableism and desires to not only problematize but refuse the notion of able(ness). Our attention is on Ableism’s production and performance. Such an exploratory work is indebted to conversations already commenced by Campbell, Hughes and Overboe.

My approach is three pronged. Firstly I explore the problem of speaking/thinking/feeling – about the Other (in this case persons referred to as ‘disabled people’) and the ‘extraordinary’ Other, the ‘Abled’. This conversation is captured under the banner of “The Ableist Project”. Here I argue it is necessary to shift the gaze of contemporary scholarship away from the spotlight on disability to a more nuanced exploration of epistemologies and ontologies of ableism. As part of this project of exposure my second task then will be to tease out the strands of what can be called “Ableist Relations”, including the effects of the compulsion to emulate ableist regulatory norms. Finally, as part of a commitment to make the necessary connections between theory and practice, I look at the tasks ahead in the refusal of Ability and the commitment to a disability/not-abled imaginary.

I. Shifting the Gaze – “The Ableist Project”

Typically literature within disability and cultural studies has concentrated on the practices and production of disablism, specifically by examining those attitudes and barriers that contribute to the subordination of people with disabilities in liberal society. Disablism is a set of assumptions (conscious or unconscious) and practices that promote the differential or unequal treatment of people because of actual or presumed disabilities. On this basis the strategic positions adopted to facilitate emancipatory social change whilst diverse, essentially relate to reforming those negative attitudes, assimilating people with disabilities into normative civil society and providing compensatory initiatives and safety nets in cases of enduring vulnerability. In other words, the site of reformation has been at the intermediate level of function, structure and institution in civil society and shifting values in the cultural arena. Such an emphasis produces scholarship that contains serious distortions, gaps and omissions regarding the production of disability and re-inscribes an able-bodied voice/lens towards disability. Disability, often quite unconsciously, continues to be examined and taught from the perspective of the Other (Marks; Solis). The challenge then is to reverse, to invert this traditional approach, to shift our gaze and concentrate on what the study of disability tells us about the production, operation and maintenance of ableism.

The earlier work of Tom Shakespeare concludes, “… perhaps the maintenance of a non-disabled identity … is a more useful problem with which to be concerned; rather than interrogating the other, let us de-construct the normality-which-is-to-be-assumed” (28). Hughes captures this project forcefully by calling for a study of the “pathologies of non-disablement” (683). An Abled imaginary relies upon the existence of an hitherto unacknowledged imagined shared community of able-bodied/minded people (c.f. Butler & Parr) held together by a common ableist homosocial world view that asserts the preferability and compulsoriness of the norms of ableism. Overboe and Campbell point to the compulsion to emulate the norm through the internalisation of ableism. Ableistnormativity results in compulsive passing, wherein there is a failure to ask about difference, to imagine human beingness differently.

Compulsory ableness and its conviction to and seduction of sameness as the basis to equality, claims results in a resistance to consider ontologically peripheral lives as distinct ways of being human least they produce a heightened devaluation. Ontological reframing poses different preoccupations: what does the study of the politics of ‘deafness’ tell us about what it means to be ‘hearing’? Indeed how is
the very conceptualisation of ‘hearing’ framed in the light of discourses of ‘deafness’? By decentring Abledness, it is possible to “to look at the world from the inside out)” (Linton 13) and unveil the ‘non-disabled/ableist’ stance. In a different context Haraway (152) exclaims “… [this] cannot be said quite out loud, or it loses its crucial position as a pre-condition of vision and becomes the object of scrutiny”.

So what is meant by the concept of ‘ableism’? A survey of the literature suggests that the term is often referred to in a fleeting way with limited definitional or conceptual specificity (Clear; Iwasaki & Mactavish: Watts & Erevelles). When there is commentary, ableism is described as denoting an attitude that devalues or differentiates disability through the valuation of able-bodiedness equated to normalcy. For some, the term ableism is used interchangeably with the term disablism. I argue however that these two words render quite radically different understandings of the status of disability to the norm. Furthermore, as a conceptual tool, ableism transcends the procedures, structures, for governing civil society and locates itself clearly in the arena of genealogies of knowledge. There is little consensus as to what practices and behaviours constitute ableism. We can nevertheless say that a chief feature of an ableist viewpoint is a belief that impairment or disability (irrespective of ‘type’) is inherently negative and should the opportunity present itself, be ameliorated, cured or indeed eliminated. Ableism refers to

… a network of beliefs, processes and practices that produces a particular kind of self and body (the corporeal standard) that is projected as the perfect, species-typical and therefore essential and fully human. Disability then, is cast as a diminished state of being human (Campbell 44).

In a similar vein, Veronica Chouinard defines ableism as “ideas, practices, institutions and social relations that presume ablebodiedness, and by so doing, construct persons with disabilities as marginalised … and largely invisible ‘others’” (380). In contrast, Amundson & Taira attribute a doctrinal posture to ableism in their suggestion that “Ableism is a doctrine that falsely treats impairments as inherently and naturally horrible and blames the impairments themselves for the problems experienced by the people who have them” (54). Whilst there is little argument with this presupposition, what is absent from the definition is any mention of ableism’s function in inaugurating the norm. Campbell and Chouinard’s approach is less about the coherency and intentionalities of ableism; rather their emphasis is on a conception of ableism as a hub network functioning around shifting interest convergences. Linton defines ableism as “includ[ing] the idea that a person’s abilities or characteristics are determined by disability or that people with disabilities as a group are inferior to non-disabled people” (9). There are problems with simply endorsing a schema that posits a particular worldview that either favours or disfavours dis/able-bodied people as if each category is discrete, self-evident and fixed. As I will argue later, Ableism sets up a binary dynamic which is not simply comparative but rather co-relationally constitutive. Campbell’s formulation of ableism not only problematises the signifier disability but points to the fact that the essential core of ableism is the formation of a naturalised understanding of being fully human and this as Chouinard notes, is articulated on a basis of an enforced presumption that erases difference.

Whether it be the ‘species typical body’ (in science), the ‘normative citizen’ (in political theory), the ‘reasonable man’ (in law), all these signifiers point to a fabrication that reaches into the very soul that sweeps us into life and as such is the outcome and instrument of a political constitution: a hostage of the body (Foucault). The creation of such regimes of ontological separation appears disassociated from power. Bodies in this way become elements that may be moved, used, transformed, demarcated, improved and articulated with others. Daily the identities of disabled and abled are performed repeatedly. An ethos of compulsory abled-bodiedness as McRuer puts it, “showcase[d] for able-bodied performance” (93) pursuant to the incessant consuming of objects of health, beauty, strength and capability. In the next section, the dividing practices of ableism are considered in more detail.

II. “Ableist Relations”
Central to regimes of ableism are two core elements that feature irrespective of its localised enactment, namely the notion of the normative (and normate individual) and the enforcement of a constitutional divide between perfected naturalized humanity and the aberrant, the unthinkable, quasi-human hybrid and therefore non-human. This constitution provides the layout, the blueprint for the scaling and marking of bodies and the ordering of their terms of relation. It is not possible to have a concept of difference without Ableism. Let’s take each of these two elements separately and explore them more closely.

The Able/Not-Able Divide

It is necessary to establish and enforce a constitutional divide. The divide is at the levels of ontology, materiality and sentiency. I wish to focus on the constitutionality of that divide between the normal and the pathological and mechanisms of ordering. This analysis is influenced by the proposals advanced by Bruno Latour in *We Have Never been Modern*.

Latour speaks of the practices of translation and purification:

... ‘translation’, creates mixtures between entirely new types of being, hybrids of nature and culture. The second, by ‘purification’: creates two entirely distinct ontological zones: that of human beings on the one hand; that of nonhumans on the other (10 - 11).

The devices of translation and purification can assist us to grapple with that which seems ‘unholdable’ and elusive; the uncontainability of the disabled body. ‘Translation’ is based on the notion that structures or networks are not obvious or self-contained. Latour uses the example of a chain flowing from the upper atmosphere, industrial strategies and onto the concerns of government and greenies. ‘Purification’ in contrast, engages in the creation of divides of ontological distinctions, which espouse a foundational (almost first cause) self-evidence. Here, Latour cites that partition between nature (as self contained), nonhumans and culture (created and driven by humans). This ‘modern critical stance’, as Latour calls it, acts as the ethos or template of modernity.

In the context of ableism, Latour’s schema proves helpful. The processes and practices of translation cannot be separated from the creation of that ordering category termed ‘disability’. For many people deemed disabled, in the world of technoscience their relationship with non-human actants has been profoundly cyborgical and hybridisable (for example the use of communication and adaptive devices, implants and transplants). As such the networks of association between human – non human (sentient beings and machines) have always been and increasingly are pushing the boundaries of the practices of purification. The disabled body induces a fear as being a body out of control because of its appearance of uncontainability. The practices of purification insist on this being the case. Ableism’s constitutional divide posits two distinct and entirely clear ontological zones: disabled and abled (normate). Latour explains

...without the first set, the practices of purification would be fruitless or pointless. Without the second, the work of translation would be slowed down, limited, or even ruled out. ... So long as we consider these two practices of translation and purification separately, we are truly modern – that is willingly subscribe to the critical project, even though that project is developed only through the proliferation of hybrids down below. As soon as we direct our attention simultaneously to the work of purification and the work of hybridization [translation], we immediately stop being wholly modern, and our future begins to change. (11)

The challenge then is to look beyond social context, at the interactivity between the processes and techniques of purification and translation, in particular to investigate what this interactivity clarifies and obfuscates. Even though Latour claims that purification is not an ideology in disguise, I would
assert that the existence of processes of purification creates a simulation if you like, of the conditions of naturalism. Latour’s discussion of whether relations are conscious and unconscious, or are illusion and reality is an important one. He concludes that moderns are not unaware of what they do; rather it is the holding steadfast to dichotomies, the divides, which makes possible the processes of translation. We can by analogy, argue that matters of intentionality or discourse and so forth, are not critical to the emerging technologies of ableism, but rather it is the act of holding stoically to the distinction between ableness and disabledness.

In contemporary developments in high-tech and biotechnologies, it is occasionally possible to witness the glitches in the purview of purification, whether that is in the debates over transhumanism, xenotransplantation or the emergent of new ‘life’ in the form of artificial intelligences (A.I’s). The confusion about where human life begins and ends harks back to the Enlightenment era where philosophers like Locke inquired “What is It?” in trying to make sense of the humanness of changelings (Campbell; Locke,). The fortunes of techno-science continue to disrupt the fixity of defining disability and normacy especially within the arenas of law and bioethics. Whilst anomalous bodies are undecidable in being open to endless and differing interpretations, an essentialised disabled body is subjected to constant deferral – standing in reserve, awaiting and escaping able(edness) through morphing technologies and as such exists in an ontologically tentative or provisional state.

Latour points out the ultimate paradox of this modern constitutional divide is that whilst the proliferation of hybrids is allowed for, at the same time this constitution continues to deny the very existence of hybrid entities within its formulation (Latour). Contemporary conditions suggest that it is not the event of denial that is operational; rather it is the ‘place’ or significance given to such ambiguous entities that disrupt the rather neat demarcation zones. Practices of purification continue to rein in (successfully or otherwise) the chaos created by increasing ‘grey zones’ along the continuum of human/nonhuman difference. In the governing of prostitution, Razack points to the creation of an anomalous zone to contain and tolerate the deviance. In dealing with political prisoners, the despised, those interned in concentration camps and institutions, Agamben indicates the manufacturing of states of exception that exist beyond the law and spatiality to enable ‘treatments’ of those existing in the realm of a bare life. The significance of the enforcement of a constitutional divide, for the practices of ableism, is that such orderings are not just repressive but they are ultimately productive; they tell us stories, they contain narratives as to ‘who’ we are and how we ‘should be’.

In the closing pages of We Have Never been Modern, Latour argues that as science creates new definitions of being human, these new formations do not displace the older versions rather humanism is redistributed. I am not entirely convinced of this emergent multiplicity and expansion of ontologies of humanness. Contra Latour, Hayles argues that should sentiency be conceptualised on the basis of informationalcy this new rendering would amount to a profound shift in the theoretical markers used to categorise all life (or what is ‘life’). In this moment there is a rallying of networks scurrying to squeeze new ontological formations of dis/ability into ‘old’ systems of ordering and thus attempt to avoid re-cognising an abundance of (post marginal, post peripheral) morphisms. Anthropomorphism becomes the catch cry of ableism. As Latour rejoices:

What Normate … Ableist Normativity?

Georges Canguilhem (69) states “every generality is the sign of an essence, and every perfection the realization of the essence … a common characteristic, the value of an ideal type”. If this is the case, what then is the essence of normative abled(ness)? Such a question poses significant conceptual challenges including the dangers of bifurcation. It is reasonably easy to speculate about the knowingness of life forms deemed disabled in spite of the neologism of disability’s catachresis orientation. In contrast – able-bodied, corporeal perfectedness has an elusive core (other than being
posed as transparently average or normal). Charting a criterion of Abled to gain definitional clarity can result in a game of circular reductionism – saying what it is in relation to what it isn’t, that which falls away. Disability performances are invoked to mean “any body capable of being narrated as outside the norm” (Mitchell 17). Such as analysis belies the issue whether at their core women’s, black and queer bodies are ultimately ontologically and materially disabled?

Inscribing certain bodies in terms of deficiency and essential inadequacy privileges a particular understanding of normalcy that is commensurate with the interests of dominant groups (and the assumed interests of subordinated groups). Indeed, the formation of ableist relations requires the normate individual to depend upon the self of ‘disabled’ bodies being rendered beyond the realm of civility, thus becoming an unthinkable object of apprehension. The unruly, uncivil, disabled body is necessary for the reiteration of the ‘truth’ of the ‘real/essential’ human self who is endowed with masculinist attributes of certainty, mastery and autonomy. The discursive practices that mark out bodies of preferability are vindicated by abject life forms that populate the constitutive outside of the thinkable (that which can be imagined and re-presented) and those forms of existence that are unimaginable and therefore unspeakable. The emptying (kenosis) of normalcy occurs through the purging of those beings that confuse, are misrecognizable or as Mitchell (17) describes as “recalcitrant corporeal matter” into a bare life (see Agamben) residing in zone of exceptionality. This foreclosure depends on necessary unspeakability to maintain the continued operation of hegemonic power (c.f. Butler). For every outside there is an inside that demands differentiation and consolidation as a unity. To borrow from Heidegger– in every aletheia (unveiling or revealedness) of representation there lies a concealedness. The visibility of the ableist project is therefore only possible through the interrogation of the revealedness of disability/not-health and abled(ness). Marcel Detienne summarizes this system of thought aptly:

[Such a] ... system is founded on a series of acts of partition whose ambiguity, here as elsewhere, is to open up the terrain of their transgression at the very moment when they mark off a limit. To discover the complete horizon of a society’s symbolic values, it is also necessary to map out its transgressions, its deviants ( ix).

Viewing the disabled body as simply matter out of place that needs to dispensed with or at least cleaned up is erroneous. The disabled body has a place, a place in liminality to secure the performative enactment of the normal. Detienne’s summation points to what we may call the double bind of ableism when performed within western neo-liberal polities. The double bind folds in on itself – for whilst claiming ‘inclusion’, ableism simultaneously always restates and enshrines itself. On the one hand, discourses of equality promote ‘inclusion’ by way of promoting positive attitudes (sometimes legislated in mission statements, marketing campaigns, equal opportunity protections) and yet on the other hand, ableist discourses proclaim quite emphatically that disability is inherently negative, ontologically intolerable – and in the end a dispensable remnant. This casting results in an ontological foreclosure wherein positive signification of disability becomes unspeakable. Disability can’t be thought of/spoken about on any other basis than the negative, to do so, to invoke oppositional discourses, is to run the risk of further pathologisation. An example of this are attempts at desiring or celebrating disability which are reduced to a fetish or facticity disorder. So to explicate ourselves out of this double bind we need to persistently and continually return to the matter of disability as negative ontology, as a malignancy, that is, as the property of a body constituted by what Michael Oliver refers to as, “the personal tragedy theory of disability.” (32)

Returning to the matter of definitional clarity around Abled(ness). Robert McRuer is one of the few scholars to journey into ableism’s non-axiomatic life. He argues that ableism (McRuer refers to compulsory abled-bodiedness) emanates from everywhere and nowhere, and can only be deduced by crafty reductionisms. Contra the assertions about the uncontainability of disabled bodies which are (re)contained by the hyper prescription and enumeration, the abled body mediated through its assumption of compulsion is absent in its presence – it just is – but resists being fully deducible. Drawing on Butler’s work, McRuer writes
My argument is that insofar as this conception of disability is assumed within discourses of ableism, the presence of disability upsets the modernist craving for ontological security.

The conundrum disability is not a mere fear of the unknown, nor an apprehensiveness towards that which is foreign or strange. Rather, disability and disabled bodies are effectively positioned in the nether regions of ‘unthought’. For the ongoing stability of ableism, a diffuse network of thought depends upon the capacity of that network to ‘shut away’, to exteriorise, and unthink disability and its resemblance to the essential (ableist) human self. This unthought has been given much consideration through the systematisation and classification of knowledges about pathology, aberration and deviance. That which is thought about (the Abled norm) rather ironically in its delimitation becomes vacuous and elusive. In order for the notion of ableness to exist and to transmogrify into the sovereign subject, the normate individual of liberalism, it must have a constitutive outside – that is, it must participate in a logic of supplementarity. When looking at relations of disability and ableism we can expand on this idea of symbiosis, an ‘unavoidable duality’ by putting forward another metaphor, that of the mirror. Here I argue that people deemed disabled take on the performative act of mirroring in the lives of normative subjects:

To be a Mirror is different from being a Face that looks back ... with a range of expression and responsiveness that are responses of a Subject-in-Its-Own-Right. To be positioned as a Mirror is to be Put Out of Countenance, to Lose Face. (Narayan 141)

In this respect, we can speak in ontological terms of the history of disability as a history of that which is unthought, to be put out of countenance; this figuring should not be confused with erasure that occurs due to mere absence or exclusion. On the contrary, disability is always present (despite its seeming absence) in the ableist talk of normalcy, normalization, and humanness (cf. Overboe) on the idea of normative shadows). Disability’s truth-claims are dependent upon discourses of ableism for their very legitimization.

III. Disability Imaginaries – Reconceptualising the Human?

Phenomenological studies have long recognized the importance of focusing on the experience of the animated living body (der Leib), in recognition that we dwell in our bodies and live so fundamentally through them. This intensity is captured by Kalekin-Fishman:

Before every action, there is a pause ... and a beginning again. The pause is for description, for mulling over the requirements of balance, for comparing the proposed action with movements that are familiar, and for explaining to myself why I can or cannot do what is at hand ... In the course of daily living, the thinking is not observable; the behavior just happens, part of what this person does naturally. The physiology of ‘a slight limp’ is part of the unmediated expression of what my ‘I’ is ... (136)

In short, we cannot ‘know’ existence without being rooted to our bodies. To this extent, it is problematic to speak of bodies in their materiality in a way that distinguishes between emotions and cognition. This generative body is shaped by relations of power, complex histories and interpreted
through a bricolage of complex interwoven subjectivities. This approach to perceiving the body in terms of *geist* or animation can be applied to re-thinking peripheral bodies deemed disabled. It is this body that infuses the discourses and animates representations. Refusing Able(ness) necessitates a letting go of the strategy of using the sameness for equality arguments as the basis of liberal freedom. Instead of wasting time on the violence of normalization, theoretical and cultural producers could more meaningfully concentrate on developing a semiotics of exchange, an ontological decoder to recover and apprehend the lifeworlds of humans living peripherally. Ontological differences, be that on the basis of problematical signifiers of race, sex, sexuality and dis/ability, need to be unhinged from evaluative ranking and be re-cognised in their various nuances and complexities without being re-presented in fixed absolute terms. It is only then, in this release that we can find possibilities in ambiguity and resistance in marginality (cf. de Beauvoir; hooks).

Instead of asking "how do you manage not being like (the non-stated) us?" (the negation argument), disability imaginaries think/speak/gesture and feel different landscapes not just for being –in-the-world, but on the conduction of perception, mobilities and temporalities. Linton points out that the "kinaesthetic, proprioceptive, sensory and cognitive experiences" of disabled people as they go about their daily life has received limited attention. Nancy Mairs notes a disability gaze is imbricated in every aspect of action, perception, occurrence and knowing.

In order to return bodies back to difference–in-the-human, a re-conceptualization of knowing (episteme) is paramount. Only this knowledge is of a carnal kind, where thinking, sensing and understanding mutually enfold. Whilst ever present in ableist normalising dialogue, disability’s veracity is undeniably contingent upon conversations of ableism, its production and performance, to confer validity.

**References**


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