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Horses, wheelchairs and place: on dehumanising disabled people

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ABSTRACT

Leading from a recent case when horses appeared to be given precedence over disabled people, this paper explores the tensions that disabled people often experience in public space. The presence of disabled people is chronically contested, monitored and questioned. Ableism plays a key role in determining where, when, what and how space is allocated. Alternative, non-disabling ways of proceeding are then suggested.

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Horses first?

Air Canada recently announced that it was now able to offer specialised air cargo transport for horses: ‘Canada’s largest airline introduced the equine transportation service last November after its research found that 14,000 horses travel internationally by air every year’ (Hanes, 2023, no pagination). Members of Canada’s disability community were taken aback by this announcement because for years they had lobbied for better protection of assistive devices in flight. A US report found that since 2018 over 15,000 such devices have been damaged or lost (Sampson, 2021). Airlines have long-held that designing secure transport space for wheelchair storage was far too costly and difficult, evidently more so than creating facilities for transporting horse by plane was not: ‘It feels like Air Canada has chosen to prioritize the comfort and safety of horses over the comfort and safety of disabled passengers’ (Tonge, 2022, no pagination).

Why are we humanising animals and dehumanising people? It would seem that animal rights at times cancel out those of disabled people in certain sectors (Herzog, 2018). Disability discrimination is not well understood and the micro-aggressions that disabled people encounter on a regular basis are often simply dismissed as the way things are (Hansen & Philo, 2007). Disabled people have more legislative protections than ever before: the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities is but one (United Nations, 2006), while in Canada disabled people have had Charter protections since 1985 (Government of Canada, 2022). According to the latest Canadian disability survey, 27% of the population identify as having a disability (Government of

Canada, 2024). Additionally, disabled people comprise the world's largest minority: 1.3 billion people or 16% worldwide (World Health Organisation, 2023).

Yet, despite significant numbers and recent national and international legislative recognition, cultural misconceptions devaluing disability remain prevalent (Hansen, 2022). Disability is not seen as a natural part of the equity collective or a social justice issue (Khedr, 2024), and in any case legislation alone does not erase prejudice.

Origins of (spaces of) devaluation and dehumanisation

How did we (disabled people) get here? Dehumanisation reveals itself in a combination of subtle and not so subtle ways. It is a process that is years in the making. The concept of the body as 'machine' – fully functioning, well-oiled – has its European or Western origins in the early-nineteenth century with the advent of the industrial revolution. The subsequent ranking and management of certain groups of people reflects earlier socially ascribed positioning dependent on perceived worthiness and individual utility (Chapman, 2023). Systems that continue to exclude, categorise, rank and colonise disabled people maintain marginalisation, something mirrored in support systems and resource allocation as and where they exist (Khedr, 2024): Thus:

... perceived understandings of normalcy [get] drawn on historical biopolitical hierarchies of the human – specifically, that of eugenic regimes – and the perpetuation of these hierarchies in contemporary Western society through the disenfranchisement of disabled individuals; ultimately this treatment of the disabled amalgamates into the positioning of them as somehow nonhuman, as 'less than', based on hegemonic notions of lack. (Fletcher, 2014, p. 90)

Traditional, outdated cultural understandings of disability remain dominant, cloaked in the 'certainty' of science (Hansen, 2009). A medicalised framework permeates almost every aspect policy, legislation and design related to disabled people (Lalush, 2023). Consequently, disabled people are regularly viewed through a lens of objectification pathologised, framed by weakness and measured subjectively against the socially standardised acceptable body (Mitchell, 2020).

This limitations-based approach to disability reinforces a lack of expectation about personal capacity (Lalush, 2023), while an individualised approach to disability maintains the illusion that there are only a few disabled people 'out there' (Khedr, 2024). As a result, disabled bodies have been given little if any consideration in the design process because disabled people remain chronic outliers in public space (Imrie, 2004). The presence of disabled people in public space is hence commonly treated as both exceptional and irregular. A friend of mine who is blind relayed this recent experience: we (her friend also has a vision impairment) made our way to the back of restaurant, I heard someone say 'There's another one', whereupon she turned and said 'Ya, we travel in packs!'

In an era where there is an increased understanding of intersectional identities, there is still little space provided for disability (Khedr, 2024). When space is provided, where, what type and how much is not decided by disabled people. We are rarely given opportunities for substantive input where these decisions are made and our opinions are routinely discounted (Hansen, 2020). Consequently, we must make the case for simply being present.

Ableism is the judgment, stereotyping and belittling of disabled people and disabilities. It is a mindset that we have continually and actively to challenge, as it is built so deeply into our society and way of life. From language to buildings around us down to the way we are taught and raised, it is ingrained in all of us: Ableism keeps us afraid of disability, but disability can happen to anyone, happens eventually to almost everyone, and is the only minority you can become a part of overnight. (Lalush, 2023, p. 2).

There appears to be an underlying and disturbing phenomenon at work here:

Aversive ableists have low explicit prejudice and high implicit prejudice. Aversive ableism focuses on those people who are progressive and well-meaning yet still participate in biased actions or thought. (Friedman, 2019, no pagination; also, Friedman, 2018)

Ableism is not a simple binary where one is or is not ableist. Rather, there are degrees and manner in which ableism presents itself dependent on proximity, circumstance and perceived inconvenience to the non-disabled majority (Friedman, 2018).

The ‘natural’ ebb and flow of socially valued activity should not be disrupted by disability support and/or accommodation (Hansen & Philo, 2007). Commodification and a narrowly utilitarian understanding of the human body are the byproducts of neoliberal global capitalism (Goodley, 2021; Oliver, 1990). Consequently, the presence of disability is routinely characterised as a problem, and so the space that disabled people occupy always remains tentative (Hansen & Philo, 2007):

One important context in which structural stigma (in the form of beliefs and policies) is manifested is the built environment. ... None focuses specifically on how societal attitude is inferred through the presence or absence of resources in and accessibility of the built environment. Previous research has not made the conceptual link between attitude and environment. (Reber et. al., 2022, p.3)

While certainly agreeing with the root argument here, it is arguably neglectful of prior work that has been undertaken, notably by disability geographers, on precisely that connection ‘between attitude and environment’: between, putting it cryptically, ‘stares’ and ‘stairs’, or condemnatory gaze and inaccessible infrastructure.

As physically disabled people, we are routinely stepped over and around when we are out and about in daily life. It as if we are invisible in public space and our presence is equally disruptive and excessive (Hansen, 2022). Apparently, there is an implicit understanding that non-disabled people and their property (in this case horses) have priority in public space (Kitchin, 1998), including in all manner of infrastructural and transport spaces. This is a form of environmental ableism, subjectively privileging non-disability and building accordingly (Hansen & Philo, 2007). It would seem that we are chronically out of place and unexpected. Moreover, the usual rules of social interaction do not apply when disability is present, with strangers commenting on how our bodies look and should be working (Hansen & Philo, 2007) if we even manage to fit into the social spaces concerned in the first place.

Lesser than

Disability is code for ‘lesser than’ (Ndlovu, 2021). At a basic level, our very humanity is questioned (Janz, 2019). Noted Princeton ethicist Peter Singer’s stance on animal rights is quite well known, his position on disabled people less so:

There will surely be some nonhuman animals whose lives, by any standard, are more valuable than the lives of some humans. A chimpanzee, dog, or pig, for instance, will have a higher degree of self-awareness and a greater capacity for meaningful relations with others than a severely retarded [*sic.*] infant or someone in a state of advanced senility. (Singer, quoted in Alford, 2021, pp. 194 and 195).

Similarly, with the Assisted Dying Bill under consideration in the UK, noted actor and disability activist Liz Carr's BBC documentary *Better Off Dead?* explores the increased acceptance of Medical Assistance in Dying (MAiD) expansion in Canada and its disturbing impact on disabled people, with physician-assisted death being presented as an option to address poverty, lack of social support and accessible housing (Carr, 2024)

This form of dehumanisation is by no means new: disabled people are simply the latest targets for colonisation or othering, be it along the lines of gender, sexuality racialisation, Indigeneity or some combination thereof that has manifested itself over time (Ceall, 2022; Smith, 2022). There are disconcerting parallels with authoritarian writings concerning 'quality of life', 'useless eaters' or 'lives less worthy' (Evans, 2004). It manifests itself when disabled people are referred to in terms of their (our) assistive devices. In her first-person article 'I am not a wheelchair', Lisa Freeman relates:

Although these people do not say 'that wheelchair is in my way,' their actions make me feel as though I'm not seen as a human, as a person, or as a fellow library patron, but rather as an object and obstacle ... People refer to me as a thing – 'a wheelchair' – in myriad everyday situations from riding the bus to returning library books ... When people refer to me as an inanimate object, I feel dismissed and dehumanized. (Freeman, 2023, no pagination)

There are serious consequences when disabled people are arbitrarily discounted. The recent COVID 19 pandemic further underscored this point, with disabled people enduring a death rate significantly higher than the non-disabled population (Tapper, 2021). How quickly we move, then, from a society that ostensibly values diversity and inclusion to the point where difficult decisions must be made and the majority feels threatened (Hansen, 2020).

A new perspective

"Ableism cannot be adequately tackled without also contending honestly and forthrightly with the many other structural prejudices that continue to shape people's mindsets, as well as our laws, policies, and everyday practices disability awareness and activities alone can't dismantle *structural* ableism." (Pulrang, 2021, no pagination)

What if we as a society chose to perceive disability differently, turning the widely accepted weak/limitation/deficit understanding of disabilities on its' head, and exploring instead disability as a creative opportunity for expectation rather than legislative compliance (Allen, 2021). Think of the possibilities. Recently, *Marketplace*, a Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) news programme, highlighted serious shortcomings in the national airlines' customer service for disabled passengers, including: lack of personal sling lifts, personal attendants asked to leave aircraft, taking photos without consent, and not boarding in requested seating:

If that's how the policy is applied, it leaves too much to chance, said Jeff Preston, an accessibility advocate and associate professor of disability studies at King's University College — and it doesn't serve the needs of people with disabilities. (McDonald et al., 2024)

Horses are treated better, and there is work to do.

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