

**Disability and Consumption:
Re-thinking Social Movements: A first thought about activism and identity**

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In thinking about the situation of disability movements, be they considering the issue of rights or removing a barrier or re-affirming a cultural position, and in contemplating the positioning and re-positioning of disabled bodies, I wish to think about the labels and terms we use to separate and devalue or value bodies. I am moved to reflect on my own experience as someone with a visible disability and as someone with an invisible learning disability, now juxtaposed with my learning as a disability studies scholar and my professional work supporting students with intellectual disabilities.

I am all at once excited as I explore histories, witness change and take pride in my role in the process. My concept of disability is reshaped as I learn and read more. I understand myself to have many allies and many peers, as I agree with Irving Zola who describes disability as an open-ended concept that is fluid-- something that people move in and out. I come alive with the notion that all bodies have a space and a context and are a text on which culture is written. A body that writes on itself reads and responds. My reflection is animated by the work of Gail Weiss who writes:

Recognizing the materiality, or more precisely, the materialities, of texts (including the body as text), is to acknowledge that all texts are necessarily embodied just as all bodies can be understood textually. What I am especially interested in establishing is *not* that text can be reduced to their materialities or that the materiality can be reduced to textuality, but rather that the body serves as a narrative horizon for all texts, and, in particular, for all of the stories that we tell about (and which are indistinguishable) from ourselves. (Weiss 2003 p. 25)

The body becomes both the artist and the canvas for the social imagination. I hope to make use of this interplay between the duality of artist and canvas as I reflect on the larger collections of text “we” as a social body produce in the various disability movements we participate in. This reflection is a preamble to a larger process which is still a major work unfinished. I wish to explore my perception of the siloing and neo-liberal approach to disability movements. To this I will employ my lived-narrative oscillating between my different roles and varied relationships to disability. My writing is informed by the work of Lenard Davis (2002). Moreover, my work also relies on the theorizing of Jim Overbow.

For much of my life, disability did not exist. Others said I was disabled, at times I felt disabled, but never did I identify as being truly disabled. Rod Michalko (2002) discusses the social discomfort that disability brings. He speaks of the body society privileges and, in his words, prepares a “home for”... He writes about the silencing of disability and how it is socially positioned as an uninteresting difference that is often understood as some how in-human. Michalko’s (2002) writing exemplifies my early experience of disability. I participated in the erasure of disability, making it uninteresting and of little to no value. I did this as a function of moving through my culture, relating to how Michalko (2002) talks about disability not having a home in society. I had internalized this sense and decided that if I was going to be at home in society, I needed to be as far away from disability as possible. I made it my life’s work to not appear disabled, and-when that wasn’t possible, I worked to qualify my personhood. In school, a case for my inclusion was made by stating “I was smart; my legs just didn’t work”. I preferred to wheel home rather than take the “accessible bus” so as not to be associated with students identified as having intellectual disability. I used words like “crazy” and “idiot” as a way of reaffirming my normalcy. I continually worked to ensure someone else embodied the disabled other more so than I. As I reflect on and think about my own experience and early positioning of disability as a microcosm for the common view of disability, I am called to think about how this mirrors the values and social positioning of disability within society. The western capitalist

society thrives on the notion of the individual repeatable body. Leonard Davis (2002) explicates the onset of the concept of normal as coming to be in the early to mid nineteenth century period with the onset of statistics. Prior to that point in time, only the notion of the ideal permeated society. He says:

Before the rise of the concept of normalcy, there appears not to have been a concept of normal; instead the regnant paradigm was one revolving around the word *ideal*. If people have a concept of the ideal, then all human beings fall below that standard and so exist in varying degrees of imperfection. The key point is that in a culture of the ideal, physical imperfections are seen not as absolute but part of a descending continuum from top to bottom (101).

Davis' point allows for the notion that the privileging of specific bodies over others is not a "natural" interaction but one that is socially produced. He is able to explicate the onset of the notion of the privileged and unprivileged body ("normal" and "abnormal"). Davis contends that the notion of "normal" stems from the creation of statistics. He writes:

Around the beginning of the nineteenth century in Europe, we begin to see the development of statistics and of the concept of the bell curve, called early on the normal curve. With the development of statistics comes the notion of the idea of norm (101).

Davis further explicates the climate this is normal curve is able to create he continues,

In this paradigm the majority of bodies fall under the main umbrella of the normal curve. Those that do not are at the extremes – and therefore abnormal. Thus there is an imperative placed on people to conform, to fit in, under the rubric of normality. Instead of being resigned to a less than ideal body in the earlier paradigm, people in the past 150 years have been encouraged to strive to be normal, to huddle under the main part of the curve (101).

Davis' work sets the theoretical stage for the birthing of the notion that one body is privileged over another, that one disability to be deemed more valuable than another. The notion that there is a "normal" body and an "abnormal" body allows for a physically disabled woman to find refuge in statements like "I am smart; my legs just don't work".

Further, the notion of the "normal" and "abnormal" body allows for disability and embodied difference of any kind to become an uninteresting personal mishap that is at best erased and at worse made to be less deviant through the juxtaposition of another's body. It is not to say that the existence of the "normal curve" allows for this division of bodies, but rather considers how the concept of normal is taken up within contemporary culture. This phenomena can be witnessed through the division of labour that is capitalism. Capitalism, Davis suggests, imagines that every worker occupies an equitable "starting position" with respect to access to the resources they need to survive and function. This, clearly, is not the case. Workers, in fact, occupy a myriad of very different positions (race, gender, education, ability/disability) with very different access to resources, and all workers have less access to resources than do capitalists. Capitalism, essentially, cannot acknowledge these differences, this inequality of access to resources, because to do so would challenge the very foundations of the capitalist economic system itself. Davis (2002, p. 104) writes,

Capitalism conceptualizes equity as equality among workers among workers rather than as financial equality—since the latter would eliminate the difference in capital between the ruling class and the workers therefore eliminate capitalism.

Davis then goes on to acknowledge an incongruence in the philosophy of enlightenment thinkers who advocate for the liberty and freedom for all. He says capitalism must somehow create an explanation for why some would have more resources and capital than others. Davis (2002, p. 109) cites the notion of the “normal” curve as the basis for just such an explanation – and, ultimately, a justification – writing,

The concept behind normalcy allows for such an explanation. If you take the bell curve as a model you notice that all variations fall into the unremitting logic of this distribution. [...] Therefore it is logical to say that something like individual wealth will conform to the curve of normal distribution – on one side will be the poor; in the middle, people of means; and on the other extreme, the very wealthy.

Davis (2002) illustrates the use of normal distribution as a justification for the uneven distribution of wealth within capitalism. His writing begins to explicate the social productions of divisions between the disabled bodies. “Normalcy” encompasses only some people, and others have to struggle to fit in. This is a situation of not being understood as the normal body, of not being able to huddle under the normal curve. The next best thing seems to be to separate oneself from their disabled identity and or create a spectrum on which you are more “normal” in comparison to another body. It is this interaction I am fascinated by. It is this interaction in which I ground in my lived experience, minimising my not being able to walk by privileging my intelligence. This also applies to the experience of hearing one disabled person state that they have more value because they are not living with another disability. For example, Jim Overbow (1999) discusses the social production of valuing individuals through the devaluing of others. He writes

Paradoxically, the image of the disabled hero validates the lived experience of a few disabled people and invalidates the lived experience of the majority of disabled people because they cannot meet such expectations. (Overboe, 1999, p. ?).

Overbow’s work can be used to explore what is done when the “normal” body is privileged over the disabled body or when one identity is given status over another. When I choose to wheel home rather than take the bus with students who were identified as intellectually disabled, what did or what does that do to their status? Overbow’s (1999) work interrogates this interaction saying, that it is not the quest for normalcy we should pursue, but the re-organizing of society to promote the value of all. This concept, this idea that there is a normal center and by marginalizing other bodies even with the voice of another’s oppressed body, one can better obtain normalcy. How does this inform our social movements? What does this do? It is my sense that when marginalization is understood as a manifestation of social organization and not a hallmark of individual deficit that lasting and effective social change can be created. I have submitted this paper as a conversation starter. A first step in an academic journey to explore how we build collations and re-organize spaces so that rather than pitting disabled experiences against each other, we can create a collective voice for change.

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