

Exploring internalized ableism using critical race theory

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This paper is an attempt to theorize about the way disabled people live with ableism, in particular internalized ableism. Typically literature within disability studies has concentrated on the practices and production of disablism, examining attitudes and barriers that contribute to the subordination of people with disabilities in society. My exploration occurs through examining the insights of critical race theory (CRT) and the contribution that CRT can further make to thinking through the processes, formation and consequences of ableism. A focal concern is the possible ways that the concept of internalized racism, its deployment in CRT and application to critical disability studies. The paper is interested in working through points of difference between the way internalized racism/ableism are mediated in the processes of subjectification and identifying points of convergence that can benefit dialogue across varied sites of scholarship. The author concludes that the study of ableism instead of disability/disablement may produce different research questions and sites of study.

Keywords: ableism; social theory; critical race theory; subjectivity; disablism

1. Mapping the project

From the moment a child is born she/he emerges into a world where she/he receives messages that to be disabled is to be less than, a world where disability may be tolerated but in the final instance is inherently negative. We are all, regardless of our subject positions, shaped and formed by the politics of ableism. This paper is about theory – it is an attempt to theorize about the way we as disabled people live with ableism. My exploration occurs through a theoretical assessment of critical race theory (CRT) and examines the contribution CRT can make to thinking through the processes, formation and consequences of ableism as well as the project of speaking otherwise about disability. In particular the paper explores the concept of internalized racism, its deployment in CRT and application to critical disability studies. The paper's focal interest is working through points of difference between the ways internalized racism/ableism is mediated in the processes of subjectification and identifying points of convergence that can benefit dialogue across sites of scholarship. First, I will outline the purview of CRT; second, the conceptual framework of ableism will be addressed. The paper then discusses internalized racism and considers the connection to the phenomena of internalized ableism.

CRT has not only problematized the notion of race as a permanent and abiding classification, but also made a contribution to race as a subjectifying practice resulting in internalized racism studies (Frankenberg 1993; McClintock 1995). CRT considers racism not aberrant but rather a natural part of American (and no doubt western) life. Expanding on this stance, Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (2000, xvi) declared:

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Because racism is an ingrained feature of our landscape, it looks ordinary and natural to persons in the culture. Formal equal opportunity – rules and laws that insist in treating blacks and whites (for example) alike – can thus remedy only the more extreme and shocking forms of injustice It can do little about the business-as-usual forms of racism that people of color confront everyday and that account for much misery, alienation, and despair.

Applying Delgado's reasoning to the state of disablement, the 'business-as-usual' forms of ableism are so refracted into the metabolism of western societies that ableism as a site of social theorization (even within critical disability studies) represents the last frontier of enquiry still preoccupied with the arcane distinction between 'impairment' and 'disability' in the government of disability. Whilst acknowledging the neologism that disability is both culturally and economically constructed, the state of impairment remains under-theorized (for notable exceptions see Tremain 2005; Corker 2001). Cultural practices of shaping bodies can affect the aetiology of 'typical' human functioning. The marking and evaluative ranking of bodies are additionally intertwined and partitioned by descriptors of 'race' and 'disability' (see Lingis 1994; Grosz 1994; Mitchell and Snyder 2003; Stubblefield 2007). Gordon and Rosenblum (2001) suggested that convergences in social constructionist approaches to race and disability may lead to new and productive sites of engagement. They argue that we can see likenesses and distinctions in the ways disabled people and other subaltern groups are named, enumerated, dis-enumerated, partitioned, stigmatized and denied attributes valued in the culture. One example is the enshrinement in Indian law of the notion of 'backward' classes, which refers to a specific segment of the population grouped by caste and location. 'Backwardness' is also made evident by intelligence quotient scales – the exposure of so-called 'sub-normalcy' and 'retardation' (Scheerenberger 1983). Certain theories of development describe whole nations of the 'third world' as 'backward' and 'undevelopable' (Baster 1954). CRT thus has an investment in 'interest convergence', a concept developed by Derrick Bell to delineate situations where white people with power endure or foster black advancement to the extent that this advancement promotes white interests (Delgado and Stefancic 2000). A critical disability studies perspective invites us to explore, as Bell suggested, the limits of liberal tolerance of disability, interest convergence and the points of departure from the interests of ableism.

2. Accounting for ableism – conceptual frameworks

In the social sciences and disability studies fields the literature has concentrated on the practices and production of disablism, specifically examining those attitudes and barriers contributing to the subordination of people with disabilities in liberal society (see, for example, Bolderson 1991; Goggin and Newell 2000; Johnson and Moxon 1998; Stainton 1994). Disablism is a set of assumptions and practices promoting the differential or unequal treatment of people because of actual or presumed disabilities.

Whilst diverse, the strategic positions adopted to facilitate emancipatory social change essentially relate to (re)forming negative attitudes, assimilating people with disabilities into normative civil society and providing compensatory initiatives and safety nets in cases of enduring vulnerability. Although some disabled people have refused the assimilationist imperative by resisting any mitigation of their impairment and spoken otherwise about disability (through new disability histories, cultures and the arts), significant numbers of disabled people still adopt culturally valued roles to blend into society. 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. For some the term ableism has been used interchangeably with the term disablism. However, these two words render radically different understandings of the status of disability to the norm. Disablism relates to the production of disability and fits well into a social constructionist understanding of disability.

Whereas ableism can be associated with the production of ableness, the perfectible body and, by default, the creation of a neologism that suggests a falling away from ableness that is disability. Harlan Hahn (1986) testified that there is a close link between an attitude of paternalism, the subordination of disabled people and the 'interests' of ableism:

Paternalism enables the dominant elements of a society to express profound and sincere sympathy for the members of a minority group while, at the same time, keeping them in a position of social and economic subordination. It has allowed the nondisabled to act as the protectors, guides, leaders, role models, and intermediates for disabled individuals who, like children, are often assumed to be helpless, dependent, asexual, economically unproductive, physically limited, emotionally immature, and acceptable only when they are unobtrusive. (Hahn 1986, 130)

Jones' (1972, 172) seminal work on racism argued that race-based power relations are galvanized 'with the intentional or unintentional support of the entire culture'. However, Richard Delgado (2000) claimed that the situation of members of racial minorities is akin to persons with a (physical) impairment. In support of this conclusion Delgado cited the work of Oliver Cromwell Cox (1948), who exclaimed that a:

rebuff due to one's skin color puts [the victim] in very much the situation of the very ugly person or one suffering from a loathsome disease. The suffering ... may be aggravated by a consciousness of incurability and even blameworthiness, a self-reproaching which tends to leave the individual still more aware of his [sic] loneliness and unwantedness. (Cox 1948, cited in Delgado 2000, 132)

Despite the remarkableness of Cox's proposition no further exploration was made by Delgado to explore intersections between the experiences of racism and ableism. As a conceptual tool ableism transcends levels of governance related to the procedures, structure, institutions and values of civil society and locates itself clearly in the arena of genealogies of knowledge. Ableism is deeply and subliminally embedded within the culture. At the outset it is important to refute an essentialized understanding of ableism. The intention here is not to propose ableism as another explanatory 'grand narrative', a universalized and systematized conception of disability oppression. Rather, my approach indicates a convergence of networks that produce exclusionary matrices and ontologies. Focusing on the study of ableism instead of disability/disablement may produce different research questions and sites of study. Whilst the players in the government of disability may change, other formations, such as the use of regimes of law and medicine, remain constant. Campbell (2001, 44) maintained that ableism is:

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 is cast as a diminished state of being human.

The corporeal standard has an illusory self-evident permanence but is always in a state of flux. Commenting on a recent dictionary definition of ableism as a kind of discrimination in favour of able-bodied people, Simi Linton (1998, 9) added that this definition also 'includes 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'. Linton, however, pointed out that, unlike discourses of racism and sexism, there is little consensus amongst the general public (and scholars) as to what practices and behaviours constitute ableism. The nuances of ableism close off certain aspects of the imagination. As Judith Butler put it:

The operation of foreclosure is tacitly referenced in those instances in which we ask: what must remain unspeakable for the contemporary regimes of discourse to continue to exercise power? (Butler 1997a, 139)

The processes of ableism see the corporeal imagination in terms of compulsory ableness, i.e. certain forms of 'perfected' materiality are posited as preferable. A chief feature of an ableist

viewpoint is a belief that impairment (irrespective of ‘type’) is inherently negative which should, if the opportunity presents itself, be ameliorated, cured or indeed eliminated. What remain unspeakable are readings of the disabled body presenting life with impairment as an animating, affirmative modality of subjectivity. Instead of ontological embrace, the processes of ableism, like those of racism, induce an internalization which devalues disablement. Unspeakable silences exist regarding the study of certain aspects of race. Pyke and Dang (2003) noted that there is an intellectual taboo/fear surrounding the study of internalized racism – attention to internalized racism may undermine the political potency of the African-American rights movement and eclipse liberalism’s black ‘success’ stories. What then about the hidden stories of the ‘can do’ generation of successful professionals with disability? One might be led to believe that the pathologization of the disability ‘problem’ has, in contrast to matters of race, meant an acceptance and awareness of internalized ableism.

3. Bodies of internalization

Joel Kovel presents a bleak but pertinent testimony of the impact of internalized racism. The ‘accumulation of negative images ... presents [racial minorities] with one massive and destructive choice: either to hate one’s self, as culture so systematically demands, or to have no self at all, to be nothing’ (Kovel 1970, 195). Penny Rosenwasser defined what she terms ‘internalized oppression’ as:

an involuntary reaction to oppression which originates outside one’s group and which results in group members loathing themselves, disliking others in their group, and blaming themselves for the oppression – rather than realizing that these beliefs are constructed in them by oppressive socio-economic political systems. (Rosenwasser 2000, 1)

The key ingredients then are negative ontologies of human signification (perverted sexualities, ambiguous bodies and skins), in the processes of subjectification which act as regulatory norms. The CRT notion of internalized racism indicates a process whereby people of colour absorb and internalize aspects of racism (Akbar 1996; Freire 1970; Harvey 1995). The nature of differentially situated realities means that one’s standpoint places us in a different relationship with internalized racism. Watts-Jones (2002) argued that for people of European descent internalized racism can empower, if not privilege, feelings of superiority. ‘It is an experience of self-aggrandizement on an individual, sociocultural and institutional level’ (592), whereas for coloured people internalized racism induces self-mortification and estrangement. Internalized racism compels people of colour to adopt strategies of disavowal as ‘enjoyment or privileges we accrue are by virtue of abandoning our identity to approximate that of the extolled group. There is no entitlement or sense of entitlement’ (592–3).

Recent research correlates the experience of racism to low socio-economic status and acquisition of physical and psychological impairment (Williams and Collins 1995). The subjectifying experiences of racism as racism not only cause distress but impact on mental health status (Kreiger 1999). Pyke and Dang argued that because internalized racism is an adaptive response to racism, compliance and resistance which in their own ways reproduce or replicate racism are interrelated processes (Pyke and Dang 2003, 151). One of the approaches of CRT is storytelling – counter storytelling in combination with the ‘historical triangulation of facts that have an impact on present-day discrimination’ (Parker and Stovall 2004). The silence of disabled people has been inverted with the emergence of a disability rights movement and the development of critical disability studies. Speaking otherwise about the lived body with impairment needs to extend to spaces exploring the personal costs of living under ableism beyond the dominant genre of biography into theory. In this respect a study of ableism, especially internalized ableism, moves outside the narrow confines of an individualized phenomenology and

squarely locates the analysis within a collectivist history of ideas and the field of discursive practices.

4. Connecting with internalized ableism

Having considered the dynamics of internalized racism, this section addresses a hitherto under-developed concept within disability studies scholarship, namely internalized ableism or disabled self-hatred. In examining sites for the internalization of racism Burstow made it clear that we should not be looking at a single event or site of impact, but rather that internalization occurs through the accumulative, residual and reoccurring experiences of racism. Burstow sharply remarked: ‘the point is oppressed people are routinely worn down by the insidious trauma involved in living day after day in a sexist, racist, classist, homophobic, and ableist society’ (Burstow 2003, 1296). Within ableism the existence of disability is tolerated rather than celebrated as a part of human diversification. I contend that internalized ableism utilizes a two-pronged strategy, the distancing of disabled people from each other and the emulation by disabled people of ableist norms.

4.1. Tactics of dispersal

The experience of disablement can, arguably, be spoken of not in terms of individualized personal tragedy but in terms of communal trauma, where the legacies of ableism pervade both the conscious and unconscious realms. Although the prevailing trope has been the individualization of disability by the domination of biomedical realism, nonetheless histories of catastrophe, negative ontologies of disability and an absence of oppositional role models saturate the lives of disabled people collectively. Unlike other minority groups, disabled people have had fewer opportunities to develop a collective consciousness, identity or culture, let alone interrogate cultures of ableism. The connection between epistemologies of ableism and the production of internalized ableism can be seen in Social Role Valorization Theory (SRV) as articulated by Wolf Wolfensberger (1972). His strategy of ‘conservatism corollary’ explicitly discourages fellowship amongst persons with disabilities and other minorities. Clearly this is a precursor to a strategy of dispersal, predicated on the belief that disabled people should not draw attention to each other via ‘mixing’ (with culturally devalued people) (Szivos 1992). This ‘dilution of deviancy’ or mitigation campaign rings familiarly in the histories of other marginalized populations, such as indigenous, coloured and gay peoples. Dispersal generates internalized ableism because congregating with other people with impairments is interpreted as a negative, inadvisable choice. Tactics of dispersal have not only received credibility through SRV, but ensure another form of biopolitics for governing the population.

The work of Schwalbe and Mason-Lovering (1996) on the injuries of racism supports this point. They argued that for Asian-Americans to deflect stigma and have imputed the characteristics of their ‘ethnicity’, they often engaged in ‘defensive othering’. Defensive othering occurs when the marginalized person attempts to emulate the hegemonic norm, whiteness or ableism, and assumes the ‘legitimacy of a devalued identity imposed by the dominant group, but then saying, in effect, “There are indeed Others to whom this applies, but it does not apply to me”’ (Schwalbe and Mason-Lovering 1996, 425). This attitude readily taps into a state-supported system of diagnostic apartheid and evaluative ranking of bodies according to type and severity of impairment. Dispersal policies are only permissible because the integration imperative exists and receives, albeit critically, significant support from the disability services sector. This is based on the belief that mainstream institutions and methods are superior to separate settings (O’Brien and Murray 1996). Separation, however, should not be confused with segregation. As Watts-Jones (2002) pointed out, ‘within-group’ processes can act as a sanctuary for healing internalized oppression.

4.2. *Emulating the norm*

The ‘naturalness’ of the notion of the abled-bodied liberal individual coupled with the negation of a disabled sensibility makes many disabled people queue for the chance to be anointed as ‘people first’, whilst simultaneously disavowing their previous embodied positions as ‘gimps;’ and ‘cripples’. Ironically, disabled people who achieve ‘people first’ status are not achieving full normative status but are only legitimizing an able-bodied resemblance through their desire for normality. (Overboe 1999, 24)

The desire to emulate the other (the norm) is contemporaneous with a process of colour and/or impairment disavowal. It attempts to establish and maintain a wide gap between that which are loathed and that which is desired. The linkage between internalized racism as a ‘rational’ response to oppression makes it possible to examine the operation of dishonour. Watt-Jones noted two levels of shame – the first is linked with being a person of colour while the second tier relates to a shame induced by being consciously aware of one’s shamefulness. Steven Kuusisto’s autobiographical extract *Planet of the blind* captures this sense of shame for people with disabilities:

Raised to know I was blind but taught to disavow it, I grew bent over like the dry tinder grass. I couldn’t stand up proudly, nor could I retreat. I reflected my mother’s complex bravery and denial and marched everywhere at dizzying speeds without a cane. Still, I remained ashamed of my blind self, that blackened [sic] dolmen. (Kuusisto 1998, 7)

Shamefulness is magnified in culture, where the rhetoric of being a survivor, a non-victim, is powerful and being a victim is to be ‘passive or deficient’ (Watt-Jones 2002, 594). For ‘enlightened’ disabled people such shame taps into a wellspring of discourses of residual disability deficiency. The emerging counter-discourse of the disability survivor mitigates against exploring the personal costs of disability subordination and normalization. In my own scholarly community the few faculty with a disability teaching disability studies report privately struggling with demands to perform, live up to leadership challenges and mentoring expectations. An isolated minority within a marginal teaching area, there are few opportunities to find a sanctuary for healing/shelter from the forces of ableism. In Australia there is an awareness that many of our disability rights movement leaders are suffering ‘burn-out’, have had emotional collapses or just moved on in order to cope with the realities of living in a hostile world. This cognizance has not to my knowledge been translated into theoretical explorations.

In the case of disability subjectification internalization of negative ontologies of disability contributes to the formation of a docile and readily pliable disabled body, continuing in various ways to inhibit performances of disability acceptance and rehabilitation so demanded by the inclusivist impulses of liberal contract theory. Internalized ableism can mean the disabled subject is caught ‘between a rock and a hard place’; in order to attain the benefit of a ‘disabled identity’ one must constantly participate in processes of disability disavowal, aspiring towards normativity, a state of near ablebodiedness, or at very least to effect a state of ‘passing’. As Kimberlyn Leary (1999, 85) put it:

Passing occurs when there is perceived danger in disclosure. ... It represents a form of self-protection that nevertheless usually disables, and sometimes destroys, the self it means to safeguard.

The workings of internalized ableism by way of ‘passing’ are only possible when viewed broadly, moving the focus from the impaired individual to the arena of relationships. In the interactivity with the norm (such as an ableized able-bodied person) another form of erasure is required. Ableist passing is not just an individual hiding their impairment or morphing their disability; ableism involves a failure to ask about difference, i.e. disability/impairment. For internalized ableism to occur there needs to be an existing *a priori* presumption of compulsory ableness. Such passing is about keeping the colonizer happy by not disturbing the peace, containing the matter that is potentially out of place.¹ An example of ‘passing’ under these circumstances would be the

conundrum encountered by some university academics with impairments who experience trepidation about revealing their impairment status, fearing stigma and tenure discrimination despite the fact that many argue that they and others would benefit from disability focused mentoring and networking arrangements (see Bishop 1999; Monaghan 1998).

Whilst successful rehabilitation may be measured in terms of personal care management, employment retraining and placement, the benchmark of successful inclusion is the acquisition of new skills for performing the part(s) of a disembodied abled self. Although there can be no denial of an injured body by rehabilitation professionals and the injured client, a way out of the strictures of injury is to adopt and emphasize those aspects of self and subjectivity that are able to mimic the qualities of ableist personhood. The corporeality of the disabled body is constantly in a state of deferral, in a holding pattern, waiting for the day it will be not just repaired but made anew (cured). Until then the conditions of fabrication, of mimicking the abled body are usually of a disembodied kind, because it is assumed that flight from the body will act as a distraction to those assimilating qualities of social conduct and deportment. In time rehabilitation personnel will be able to recreate corporeal normalcy by way of rebuilding or morphing the injured body to a form that for all practical purposes replicates the old (whole) form (see Campbell 2004). Developments in new technologies have the effect of re-conceptualizing impairment in terms of provisional or tentative disability (Campbell 2005, 2007).

4.3. Ableism produces disabled subjectivities

Internalization involves apprehending that which ‘belongs to the other [and incorporating it as] one’s own’ (Wertsch 1998, 53). Clearly, the processes of internalization are not straightforward and predictable. As Fanon remarked: ‘In the colonial context the settler only ends his work of breaking in the native when the latter admits loudly and intelligibly the supremacy of the white man’s values’ (Fanon, cited in McClintock 1995, 329). However, the absorption process is deeper, implying a belief that the subaltern body requires something that ‘only their superior dominators have or can give them’ (Oliver 2004, 78). This may be a somewhat lumpy and indigestible process as many words obstinately refuse, sounding alien in the voice of the one who enacts them through speech. In any case, the internalization of negativity ultimately shapes and inspires technologies of self and the ways in which such technologies become mediated within a range of networks:

Internalized oppression is not the cause of our mistreatment; it is the result of our mistreatment. It would not exist without the real external oppression that forms the social climate in which we exist. Once oppression has been internalized, little force is needed to keep us submissive. We harbour inside ourselves the pain and the memories, the fears and the confusions, the negative self-images and the low expectations, turning them into weapons with which to re-injure ourselves, every day of our lives. (Mason, as cited in Marks 1999, 25)

Internalized ableism means that to assimilate into the norm the referentially disabled individual is required to embrace, indeed to assume, an ‘identity’ other than one’s own – and this subject is repeatedly reminded of this by epistemological formations and individuals with hegemonic subjectifications of their provisional and (real) identity. I am not implying that subjects have a true or real essence. Indeed the subject’s formation is in a constant state of fluidity, multiplicity and (re)formation. However, disabled people often feel compelled to fabricate ‘who’ they are – to adopt postures and comportments that are additional to self. The formation of internalized ableism cannot be simply deduced by assessing the responses of individuals to Althusser’s famous interpolative hailing ‘Hey you, there’ (Althusser and Balibar 1979). Whilst a subject may respond to ‘Hey you there, cripp!’, it is naïve to assume that an affirmative response to this hailing repressively inaugurates negative disabled subjectification. In fact, the adoption of more

positive or oppositional ontologies of disability by the subject in question may be unexpectedly enabling. As Susan Park (2000, 91) argued ‘what is at stake here is not so much the accuracy behind the hailing privilege, but the power of the hailing itself to instantly determine (or elide) that thing it is naming’. Nonetheless, censure and the cancellation of the legitimacy of oppositional subjectivities remains commonplace, as Cherney reminded us with respect to deaf culture: ‘If abnormal [sic] bodies must be fixed to fit within dominant cultural views of appropriateness then the Deaf celebration of their differences must be read as an illegitimate model of advocacy’ (Cherney 1999, 33).

Foucault’s (1976, 1980) theorization of power as productive may provide some offerings from which to build a conversation about internalized ableism. I am not so much interested in the ‘external’ effects of that power, but for the moment wish to concentrate on what Judith Butler aptly referred to as the ‘psychic life’ of power. She described this dimension thus:

an account of subjection, it seems, must be traced in the turns of psychic life. More specifically, it must be traced in the peculiar turning of a subject against itself that takes place in acts of self-reproach, conscience, and melancholia that work in tandem with processes of social regulation. (Butler 1997b, 19)

In other words, the processes of subject formation cannot be separated from the subject him/herself who is brought into being through those very subjectifying processes. The consequences of taking into oneself negative subjectivities not only regulate and continually form identity (the disabled citizen) but can transcend and surpass the strictures of ableist authorizations. Judith Butler described this process of the ‘carrying of a mnemonic trace’:

One need only consider the way in which the history of having been called an injurious name is embodied, how the words enter the limbs, craft the gesture, bend the spine ... how these slurs accumulate over time, dissimulating their history, taking on the semblance of the natural, configuring and restricting the doxa that counts as ‘reality’. (Butler 1997b, 159)

The work of Williams and Williams-Morris (2000) linked racism experienced by African-Americans to the effects of hurtful words and negative cultural symbols on mental health, especially when marginalized groups embrace negative societal beliefs about themselves. They cite an international study by Fischer et al. (1996), which *inter alia* linked poor academic performance with poor social status. Although using different disciplinary language, Wolfensberger (1972), in his seven core themes of SRV, identified role circularity as a significant obstacle to be overcome by disabled people wanting socially valued roles. Philosopher Linda Purdy contended that it is important to resist conflating disability with the disabled person. She wrote:

My disability is not me, no matter how much it may affect my choices. With this point firmly in mind, it should be possible mentally to separate my existences from the existence of my disability. (Purdy 1996, 68)

The problem with Purdy’s conclusion is that it is psychically untenable, not only because it is posited around a type of Cartesian dualism that simply separates beingness from embodiment, but also because this kind of reasoning disregards the dynamics of subjectivity formation to which Butler (1997a, 1997b) had referred. Whilst the ‘outputs’ of subjectivity are variable, the experience of impairment within an ableist context can and does effect formation of self – in other words ‘disability is me’, but that ‘me’ does not need to be enfolded with negative ontologies of subjectivity. Purdy’s bodily detachment appears locked into a loop that is filled with internalized ableism, a state with negative views of impairment from which the only escape is disembodiment; the penalty of denial is a flight from her body. This is in agreement with the reasoning of Jean Baudrillard (1983), who posited that it is the simulation, the appearance (representation) that matters. The subject simulates what it is to be ‘disabled’ and, by inference, ‘abled’ and whilst morphing ableist imperatives in effect performs a new hyper reality of being disabled.

By unwittingly performing ableism disabled people become complicit in their own demise – reinforcing impairment as an outlaw ontology.

Before proceeding I need to clarify this argument, because my reasoning and your reading about subjectivity always occurs in context. Much of the discussion about ‘disability is me’ raises another related claim that requires comment, namely the matter of immutability. In recent years claims around minority rights protection, especially within the Federal arena of law in the USA, have been based on the immutability argument in opposition to cultures or identities of ‘choice’ (Currah 1995). The argument suggests that when individuals or populations have an attribute that is inherent and unable to be removed (e.g. colour and race) there is a stronger claim for civil rights entitlements than claims being pressed by groups where referentiality can be chosen or changed (e.g. the controversy of ‘homosexual’ orientation is an often cited example).

Within this illusionary binary world of fixed or chosen corporeal attributions the status of impairment is not so clear. Impairment is inherent within the body (or mind, cognition and so forth), however, impairment, despite often being characterized (etiologically) as ‘permanent’ is in a broader sense ‘provisional’. Impairments exist in a state of constant deferral, being open to the interventions of psycho-medical regimes posting corrections, cures or indeed elimination (Campbell 2001, 2005). While the act of strategic essentialism (utilizing strict categories of personhood to access social benefits, e.g. deaf people registering for disability programmes even if sections of this group do not identify as ‘disabled’) might initially seem commendable and even be viewed as an act of subversive resistance, it also brings into itself acts of ‘self-subversion’, wherein passports of recognition become passports of unfreedom, for it can be difficult to uphold the divide between negative ascriptions and negative internalized incorporations of impairment into one’s subjectivity.

What begins as an attempt to gain benefits and potentially usurp the forces of enumeration and calculation in the governing of disability often ends up becoming complicit, reproducing the constitutional ontologies essential to the continued power of ableism. The deployment of the neologism disability strategically cannot be undertaken without some incorporation of internalized ableism, either at a conscious or unconscious level. Within ableism disability cannot be detached from its negative association. People living with impairment face these two dilemmatically coexisting dynamics, sometimes jostling in tension, even when adopting outlaw and resistant subjectivities and lifestyles.

5. Conclusion: let it all hang out!

I HATE [it] when people tell me how well I’ve overcome my disability. To me, it’s suggesting that I am separate from my body. But my body is me and I am my body. This includes my disability. It is part of who I am and a part of what makes my body beautiful and a part of what makes me a beautiful person. My disability CANNOT be separated from who I am. I cannot overcome my own body. (Shain 2002)

The ruminations of CRT (cf. Delgado and Stefancic 2000) transposed to an analysis of ableism point to its embeddedness. The very existence of ableism and its effects, like racism, are covert but more often profoundly veiled. Ableism as an epistemology and ontological modality frames an individual’s subjectivity and thus becomes the power ‘that animates ones emergence’, complicity and resistance (Butler 1997b, 198). At the end of this paper two strong images of living with impairment emerge. The first is of disabled people as survivors. People with disabilities labour under the pain and burden of violence – violence that is epistemic, psychic, ontological and physical. This labouring has resulted in lives of ontological vulnerability. For scholars there is an ethical imperative to interrogate the violence of ableism and speak of its injuries. By exposing the practices of ableism and unravelling the psychic life of internalized ableism,

unearthing various states of injury, (apologies to Wendy Brown, 1995), when reiterating these violences and injuries I am mindful of the necessity not to re-perform them. An example here could be the continual usage of photographic images of people exhibited as freaks when alive and re-exhibited in a form of fetishist graphics on the Internet. To do so would be to fall victim to a theorizing that reinstitutes the notion of an overwhelming vision of catastrophe, where disabled people are forever sucked into the vortex of being perpetual victims. This paper invites the reader to sign up to the field of critical ableism studies and argues for a critical need to investigate internalized ableism and its effects on the psychic life of our community. Further research could explore the process of counter-storytelling about liberalism's so-called 'disability success stories' and the way these stories differ when the individual 'succeeds' in spite of impairment and those stories which embrace impairment and frame success in terms of 'because disability'.

The second image is of disabled people engaged in guerrilla activity – rejecting the promises of liberalism and looking elsewhere, daring to *speak otherwise* about impairment. For too long critical theorist's have figured places of marginality and liminality as places of exile – where the emarginated are to be 'brought in from the cold' and integrated so that they too can sit beside the 'warm fires' of liberalism (and all will be well). However, as bell hooks reminds us, the margin can be '... more than a site of deprivation ... it is also the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance'. (hooks 1990, 149, emphasis in original).

Note

1. Thomson cites a number of strategies, such as charm, humor and deference to relieve the discomfort of able bodied people (Thomson 1997, 12–3).

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