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**Towards a relational geography of disability**

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Progress in
Human Geography

# Towards a Relational Geography of Disability

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| Abstract: | In this paper we develop linkages between non-representational theory and emerging work by disability scholars in geography.  We argue that non-representational thinking has the potential to advance our understanding of the complex and emergent geographies of dis/ability.  We first outline key dimensions of non-representational thinking within geography. We then explore how this perspective has begun to, and might further inform, geographical scholarship on disability. Next, we extend our thinking to consider how NRT might provide the basis for a critical geography of the 'able-body'. We conclude by reflecting on the conceptual, political, methodological and empirical implications of our argument. |

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**I Introduction**

In this paper we argue that a new phase in the geographical study of disability is emergent.

Although the flurry of scholarly activity that characterized the mid-1990s to early 2000s has

eased, a number of authors are beginning to identify the potential for a novel approach to

dis/ability, drawing on the relational turn and, in particular non-representational theory (NRT), in

geography (e.g. Macpherson, 2009, 2010; Power, 2013; Stephens et al., 2015). We contend that

these developments have the potential not only to advance our understanding of the complex and

emergent geographies of disability, but also to unsettle broader assumptions about the nature of

the 'able-body'.

During the 1990s, the emergence of the politically-inspired 'social model' of disability

(Oliver, 1990) provided the conceptual hook for an 'awakening of interest' amongst a new

generation of geographers in disability as a materialist 'socio-spatial phenomenon' (Gleeson,

1999: 29; see also, Butler, 1994; Imrie, 1996a; Gleeson, 1996; Park et al., 1998). The social

model separated 'both ontologically and politically, the oppressive social experience of disability

from the unique functional limitations (and capacities) which impairment can pose for

individuals' (Gleeson, 1999: 52); geographical studies highlighted the physical and attitudinal

barriers within 'disablist' built, social and institutional environments (e.g. Laws, 1994; Imrie,

1996b; Chouinard, 1997; Kitchin, 1998).

A 'strong' social model, drawing a clear distinction between (bodily) impairment and

(socio-spatial) disability, proved to be a powerful tool in the reconceptualisation and

politicisation of disability in geography and broader social science. Whilst it remains an enduring

presence in disability studies (Shakespeare, 2014), this version of the social model has been the

subject of intense critique, focused on the consequent neglect of the diverse and difficult

materialities of the lived impaired body (French, 1993; Shakespeare and Watson, 1995). This

critique was picked up and developed by geographers engaging with poststructuralism and, in

particular, embodiment and performative notions of identity (Butler and Parr, 1999; Hall, 2000),

in studies of chronic illness (Moss and Dyck, 1996), emotional and behavioural problems (Holt,

2004) and mental ill health (Parr, 2000; 2006).

Using this theoretical perspective, geographers increasingly understood social

environments not as pre-determinedly exclusionary and oppressive (as conceived by Gleeson,

1999) for people with impairments (though in many instances they were and continue to be so),

but rather as contexts in which people engage and perform their embodiment and in so doing

re/produce and transform both themselves and their surroundings. Imrie and Edwards (2007:

626) conceptualised this as the 'recursive relationship between identity and space'. Imrie's

(2004) study of accessible housing offers an example, recognising the 'importance of

embodiment in influencing people's experiences of, and meanings attributed to, home' (41),

concluding that impairment does not 'acquire meaning of function independent from social

context or setting' (ibid.). Both embodiment and home become what they are through the active

inter-relationality of embodied and emotional actions, intentions and desires.

To a significant degree, these arguments reflect broader disciplinary developments.

Murdoch (2006) and Massey (2005) argued for a relational sense of space; spaces as *made up of*

relations and, as such, always being 'made, unmade, and remade by the incessant shuffling of

heterogeneous relations' (Doel, 2007: 810). From this perspective, rather than separating the

'oppressive social experience of disability' from the 'limitations (and capacities) [of]

impairment' (Gleeson, 1999: 52), we can imagine bodies (both impaired and non-impaired),

objects and spaces engaged in shifting relations that have the capacity to produce both

exclusionary and/or enabling arrangements.

A similar 'relational turn' has emerged within critical disability studies. Building on

Thomas' (1999; 2004) notion of disability 'as an unequal social relationship between those who

are impaired and those who are non-impaired or 'normal' in society' (1999: 40), a complex,

multi-scalar or 'laminated' (Bhaskar and Danermark, 2006: 290), social relational understanding

of disability has developed (Gustavson, 2004; Watson, 2012). Shakespeare (2014) cites Williams

(1999) earlier insightful summary: 'Disability … is an emergent property, located, temporally

speaking, in terms of the interplay between the biological reality of physiological impairment,

structural conditioning (i.e. enablement/constraints) and socio-cultural interaction/elaboration'

(Williams, 1999: 810; in Shakespeare, 2014: 73).

While there has been some recognition, then, of the importance of relational thinking for

geographic scholarship on disability, our aim in this paper is to spur further discussion and

debate by engaging more fully with a key stream of relational thinking in human geography, that

of non-representational theory. We argue that key elements of non-representational thinking

challenge existing ways of doing disability geography. These include the shift from an

epistemological emphasis on meaning and identity to an ontological concern with bodies and

material doings, as well as a decentring of a stable – or what Macpherson (2010) refers to as an

'authentic' – disabled subject in favour of an emphasis on relational becomings. At the same

time, these challenges carry important opportunities to think differently about how *all* bodies

become dis/abled in and through their everyday geographies and how such becomings might be

made otherwise.

In what follows, we first outline key features of recent NRT work within geography. We then explore how this perspective has begun to, and might further inform, geographical scholarship on disability. In the final section, we extend our thinking to consider how relational approaches can inform a broader conception of 'dependent bodies' that problematizes the distinction between disabled and non-disabled becoming. We conclude by reflecting on the conceptual, political, methodological and empirical implications of relational thinking for the geographical (and broader) study of dis/ability.

## II Non- Representational Geographies

Non-Representational Theory has had a broad impact across human geography in recent years, shaping debates in fields of study that overlap and intersect with disability geographies; for example, the geography of aging (Hopkins and Pain, 2007; Andrews et al., 2013), health geography (Andrews et al., 2014; Kearns, 2014) and feminist geography (Thien, 2005; Colls, 2012; Colls and Evans, 2014). A key element of this approach has been its emphasis on the importance of practice – what Thrift (1996: 6) described as 'the manifold of action and interaction' – as the basis of social life, and as the source for conscious meaning and intent. As Barnett (2008: 188) notes, this theoretical shift has been linked to 'a strong preference for models of ethical and political agency that focus attention upon embodied, affective dispositions of subjects.' This focus on embodied practice is concerned with demonstrating the significance of seemingly mundane, habitual, non-reflexive practices for how we come to understand ourselves and the world. Moreover, in non-representational approaches practice is conceived in relational terms such that the making – and the making sense – of social life happens in and through relational connections between heterogeneous bodies, objects and environments. Foregrounding

the ongoing, practical achievement of life allows for a focus on what bodies can or cannot do in specific settings. As Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 257) contend in a well-known passage:

> We know nothing about a body until we know what it can do, in other words, what its affects are, how they can or cannot enter into composition with other affects, with the affects of another body, either to destroy that body or to be destroyed by it, either to exchange actions and passions with it or to join with it in composing a more powerful body.

As Lim (2010) suggests, asking what a body can do is to pose a 'genuinely open' question that does not assume a given social or biological functionality to a particular body, but is concerned instead with how a body's capacity emerges from a specific and shifting field of potential. This field of potential is 'virtual' in the sense that it contains all of the ways in which the bodies involved might affect one another, and from which one event or outcome becomes actual.

A second key element of NRT has been its focus on the ways in which the relational practice of social life is shaped by 'the more than or less than rational', recognizing the importance of the emotional and the affectual in 'the composition of harmonious or disharmonious relations amongst diverse collectivities of human and non-humans' (Anderson 2006: 735). The concept of affect has been widely used to describe the transpersonal capacity that bodies possess to 'move' and be moved by one another (Anderson 2006). Dewsbury (2009: 21) suggests that approaching affect as relational medium and force produces an understanding of subjects as:

> …caught and situated as bodies within radiating ripples and circuits of feeling, intensity, response and sensation, the flows of which wrap into and fold out of the body we call our

own. There is then no such thing as a singular subject but rather a series of potential

subjectivities that are multiple and emergent

These affective relations are driven by desire; indeed, for Deleuze, desire is central to the

composition of the social (Probyn, 1996: 49). As Probyn explains, desire propels bodies into

networks and relationships with other bodies and things in specific settings or milieu. These

engagements of desire are made and unmade across bodies that are both biological but also

collective and political. For Deleuze, desire is not constituted by some primary lack (as in

Freudian terms) but is rather concerned with the desire for relations with others in order for

bodies to act, to do things (Lim, 2010). As we show in the next section, this conception has

particular potency for both recognizing disabled bodies' desires for connections and

engagements, and the ways in which such desires can be frustrated through marginalization and

exclusion (see also Duff 2011).

Within NRT, an emphasis on relational practice, and upon the capacity of bodies to affect

and be affected by others, is also bound up with an understanding of subjectivity as something

'radically contingent' upon, and emerging from, the specific happenings and experiences that

make up a social life (see Anderson and Harrison 2010: 13). This is an understanding of

subjectivity as process of *becoming*, reflecting what McCormack (2009: 277) describes as a

'process-based ontology of movement in which the world is conceived of as a dynamic and

open-ended set of relational transformations'. Moreover, subjective becoming is not irreducible

to, or confined within, the 'individual' but is understood as 'collective enterprise, 'external' to

the self while it also mobilizes the self's in-depth structures' (Braidotti 2003: 51).

NRT's emphasis on the immediate or 'immanent' making of subjective experience

through embodied and relational practice has important parallels with relational thinking in

recent disability scholarship outlined earlier (Thomas, 2004; Bhaskar and Danermark, 2006). It

also raises fundamental questions about the nature of 'the social' as something that can be

understood to transcend, and provide a pre-existing context for, both disabled and non-disabled

embodied experience. In non-representational theories, the social is not something that 'can be

invoked to explain the durability of this or that practical ordering' (Anderson and Harrison,

2010: 18). Instead the social is understood to comprise multiple orders that *depend on* the

repetition of practices for their composition. In one sense, the argument against a social order

that pre-exists relational activity seems to suggest a world of infinite possibility and fluidity

(Jones, 2009). Yet, as Anderson and Harrison (2010) point out, the adoption of a relational

account of the social does not imply an absence of enduring orders or the harms and inequalities

that flow from such orders. Rather:

> Beginning from the social as a practical achievement provides a method for thinking
>
> through how systematic processes of harm *become* systematic (18, emphasis in original)

Lim (2010) offers an insightful discussion of how we might understand the process through

which difference and inequality become systematic, drawing together the Deleuzian concepts of

affect and machinism. He argues that while what a body can do emerges from a field of potential

that contains a multiplicity of possible outcomes, this virtual field of potential is an 'impure

space' shaped in part by 'virtual memories' that reflect previous actualized relations between

bodies (also Grosz, 2005: 97). In this sense, the virtual contains both the potential to behave

differently but also fragments of memory – clusters of affect that are partly conscious/

unconscious – that suggest 'how bodies should properly relate to other bodies' (2010: 2399). As

Lim notes:

> If we think of affect in terms of both the potentiality to repeat a functional arrangement of
>
> bodies and the potentiality to do something new – to disorganize and disorder the body
>
> and its relations in order that they may be reordered – then the emergence of affect
>
> becomes a political problem to be interrogated

For Lim, approaching the political problem of affect requires a concurrent understanding of the

mechanisms through which bodies are connected with other bodies and with their environments,

something that resonates with disability scholars' emphasis on the disabling/enabling character

of different social-spatial contexts. For Deleuze, bodies connect and combine with other bodies

through social machines or machinic assemblages, producing particular organizations and

functional capacities. Such machines are organized and powered by desire, the desire of bodies

to enter into relations with other bodies in order to do things (Lim, 2010; also Probyn, 1996;

Anderson and McFarlane, 2011). It is within these machines that specific affects are actualized.

On the one hand, machines have the capacity for repetition, actualizing existing affective

patterns that reflect memories of how different bodies *should* relate to one another that, in turn,

reproduce 'habitual circuits of sense-making' (Bissell, 2010: 483 in Dewsbury, 2011). On the

other, machines have the potential to produce other connections and affects that reflect the

specificity of each event and encounter. Moreover, machines can be disrupted and reconfigured

to produce new assemblages, in and through which new and less oppressive affects may be

actualized and new forms of becoming initiated (Ruddick, 2012). As we suggest in the following

sections, a focus on what desiring bodies can or cannot do within specific assemblages has

important implications for how we think about the 'emergent' character of both disabled and

non-disabled subjects.

**III Relational Geographies of Disability**

NRT's relational material approach emphasizes both the incomplete process of human (and non-human) becoming, and the contingent networks and assemblages in, through and across which different forms of subjective becoming are made possible. This focus on the 'transpersonal' (Anderson and Harrison 2010) or 'impersonal' (Rajchman 2001) nature of social life has engendered some criticism that it risks 'pushing past' embodied personal experience (Thien, 2005). However, the potential of such a perspective for disability scholarship may be in its capacity to move beyond an impairment/disability binary, recognizing instead the multiplicity of processes operating within, through and between bodies, objects and spaces that combine to shape subjective becoming. This potential comes through in Elizabeth Grosz' (2005) work on force (see also Colls, 2012). Grosz draws directly from Deleuze to argue for an approach to subjectivity grounded in the recognition of the material forces, energies and practices that work through and between bodies such that:

> Subjects can be conceived as modes of action and passion, a surface catalytic of events, events which subjects don't control but participate in, which produce history and thus whatever identity subjects may have (88)

There are important parallels here with the work of Jones (2009; 2014) who has written about the potential to balance a fluid and emergent conception of space with a recognition of fields of force 'expressed through politics, power, positionality, consciousness, inertia and embeddedness' (2009: 500) that structure, frame, scale and institutionalize particular spatial orders over time. Both Grosz and Jones offer a way to understand how space and subjectivity are provisional and emergent. Moreover, Grosz is explicit that force should be understood not as human power, but rather as inhuman, operating at scales above and below the human subject's control: 'forces that

are both living and nonliving, macroscopic and microscopic, above and below the level of the human' (190). From this perspective, corporeal differences are understood as: 'material, evolutionary forces through which we work but which we do not control, which we cannot rise above but which nevertheless direct us towards the possibilities of change' (89). We see evidence of the value of this line of thinking in recent work by geographers in three overlapping areas: the subjective becoming of dis/ability, the relational nature of spaces of dis/ablement, and the machinic assemblages in which such relations are actualized.

*Becoming Dis/Abled*

Crucially, a relational material approach directs attention to the ways in which subjective experiences of *both* disability *and* non-disability emerge through shifting relations with other bodies, objects and spaces. For example, Bissell's (2009) work on his experience of chronic pain offers one exploration of such an approach. While always experienced in and through the body, Bissell (2009) suggests that conceived as a set of intensities:

> …chronic pain might not be an enemy to be overcome, where life can begin once its intensity has waned, but just an *encounter with force*. This imperative is not aligned with the rather nauseating idea of 'always looking on the bright side', but rather promises that bodies are always more than one particular set of intensities. My body will always be more than pain… (925-6, emphasis in original)

In Bissell's work, there is not a discounting of subjective experience, but rather a conceptual reworking that decentres the subjective, while recognizing those forces that work above, below, within and beyond bodies, and from which subjective becoming emerges.

Macpherson (2009; 2010) also provides insight into the ways that fields of force operate

to shape subjective becoming. In her research on visually impaired people's engagement with

landscape, Macpherson argues that human subjectivity and landscape emerge 'inter-corporeally'

through shifting encounters between human bodies, the material landscape, embodied memories,

and enduring assumptions about how to 'see' landscape. Her analysis illustrates the ways in

which different fields of force – for example, elements of the material surroundings such as

weather, light, and terrain; the affective intensities and physical interactions between the bodies

of guides and walkers; the shifting nature and extent of visual impairment/residual vision; and

prevailing norms about how bodies should engage with landscape – come together to shape and

constrain inter-corporeal emergence.[1] Crucially, for Macpherson, the 'doing' of body-landscape

relations contributes to the co-emergence of both sighted guides and visually impaired walkers'

subjectivities. In this way, a relational approach grounded in NRT 'can compel us to think of

how we emerge through, are responsible to, and have an embodied 'debt' to others' (2009:

1052).

A similar theme is developed in Worth's (2013) study of high school students with visual

impairment. For Worth, students develop their experiences and understanding of what it is to

have, and to not have, a visual impairment through intense and shifting social relations with

peers and teachers in the context of specific educational settings. Rich with emotion and

embodiment, this co-emergence of dis/abled subjectivities is characterized by Worth as an

ongoing 'push and pull between how young people see themselves and the consequences of how

they are viewed by others' (108).

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[1] There are parallels here with the critical realism outlined by Bhaskar and Danermark (2006) in the sense that they
are talking about 'laminated' levels of reality that include the biological, physiological, psychological, socio-
material and cultural.

Finally, the inter-corporeal nature of dis/ability is evident in Smith's (2012) work on

Epilepsy. Smith captures the unpredictability of seizures and people's concerns about potential

loss of self-control in public spaces, but his research also illustrates the way in which subjective

experiences of seizure emerge *across* the 'simultaneous but different experiences of witnesses

and the person 'seized'' (348). In cases where an individual loses consciousness, a seizure is

only witnessed by other people and their accounts of the event become essential to the subjective

experience of epilepsy. Smith (2012) concludes by arguing for a 'radical body politics' that 'does

not conceptualise the body with epilepsy in opposition to the normative body, but recognises

instead that all bodies are involved in complex, relational and inter-subjective corporealities'

(354).

*Spaces of Dis/Ablement*

At the same time, NRT's understanding of space and place as 'encountered, performed and fluid'

(Jones, 2009: 492) offers an important challenge to static designations of spaces as either

marginal or mainstream, inclusive or exclusionary; designations that are often employed in

prevailing social and educational policy discourses (Holt, 2010b; Goodfellow 2012). This is a

welcome conceptual development as it has been noted for some time that many disabled people

find experiences of inclusion and belonging within supposedly marginal environments (such as

sheltered employment) yet struggle with marginalization in sites thought to be inclusive and

integrative (such as mainstream workplaces) (Hall, 2005). Explicit attention to the emergent

properties of space and place helps to foreground the complex relational configurations that

shape and reshape the character of specific settings.

Stephens et al (2015) illustrate this point in their research on the experiences of children

with physical disabilities in home, school and neighbourhood settings. Drawing directly from

Deleuze to think about the ways in which children's bodies *become* in the context of specific

assemblages, the authors argue that:

> We cannot presume a priori that one context is more or less inclusive than another… how
>
> children perceive, navigate, conform to or contest different discursive cultures and
>
> physical infrastructures of home, school and neighbourhood is key (213)

Other recent work on young people's experiences of educational spaces also illustrates the

importance of a relational perspective. 'Inclusive education', with disabled children and young

people taught in 'mainstream' school spaces alongside their able-bodied peers, is now favoured

in the Global North (Goodfellow, 2012). As part of this movement, it is common for separate

areas or classrooms to be created within schools, for children with learning disabilities and

behavioural/emotional issues to receive part of their learning. There are benefits to this,

providing additional support for learning and, for some, a 'refuge' from the challenging

environment of the school's corridors and open spaces (Holt, 2010a; Holt et al., 2012). However,

conceived relationally, the character of a specific classroom or school setting can be understood

as something that emerges from its connections with particular networks of teachers, parents,

students and policymakers, and in relation to particular configurations of signage, seating

arrangements, timetables, learning technologies and teaching practices, and official curricula.

Such an approach resists the static classification of such spaces as either inclusive or

exclusionary, recognizing that the way they are inhabited and interpreted within the context of

specific relational networks will help determine their meaning and status (Goodfellow 2012). At

the same time, as Holt (2010b) has recognized, these relationally constituted spaces can and do

persist over time, shaping the subjective becoming of the young people therein. This finding is

consistent with Jones' (2009) broader argument about the need to balance a fluid and relationally

mobile conception of space with recognition of the fields of force that structure, frame, scale and institutionalize particular spatial orders over time.

*Dis/abling Assemblages*

Recent work also directs attention to the ways in which dis/abled bodies' capacities to act and the possibilities for subjective becoming are shaped and constrained by the workings of machinic assemblages. Both Worth (2013) and Smith (2012), for example, are clear that the relations that animate subjective becoming in educational settings and public spaces are far from consensual and straightforward. In these and other spaces, 'systematic processes of harm' (cf. Anderson and Harrison, 2010) limit what certain (impaired and other) bodies can do, closing down the field of potential in and through which these bodies might enter into relations with other bodies.

This point can be illustrated through consideration of the ways in which dis/abled bodies' capacities for action are shaped and constrained by formal care systems as machinic assemblage. Consider, for example, the relational space constituted by an encounter between someone living with a significant mobility impairment and a personal support worker. In one sense, this encounter may involve one body doing something to and for another body – e.g. helping with dressing and bathing – often in combination with other bodies and objects (bed, wheelchair, hoist) (Munro, 2013). At the same time, the intimate co-mingling of bodies in this setting can also be understood to produce a complex and shifting mix of affects. These intimate relations and the affects that circulate within them are situated within and shaped by a broader care assemblage constituted by overlapping publicly and privately funded systems of provision that determine access, the quality and quantity of care provided, as well as the wages and working conditions of paid care providers.

In recent decades, the shifting nature of formal care assemblages in many Western countries, particularly the outsourcing and downgrading of publicly funded care provision, has shaped relational contexts in ways that limit what bodies – both those of recipient and provider – can do. Such assemblages, following Lim (2010), produce particular judgments – whether unconscious or otherwise – about how bodies are *supposed* to behave. Sentiments concerning the 'difficult' or 'needy' client or the 'lazy' or 'insensitive' worker can be intensified within a context of limited support hours and precarious work, in ways that 'fix' subjectivities and actualize particular affective patterns and prejudices (Cranford and Miller, 2013). In this context, opportunities for bodies to co-mingle and depend upon one another are impoverished, and other opportunities for subjective becoming are foreclosed. Yet we can also imagine a different care assemblage in which adequate hours of support and secure employment allow for the emergence of a relational space of 'being with' between care recipient and provider – an unrushed moment of meaningful encounter (Cranford and Miller, 2013). Such relational settings open up the possibility of other forms of encounter and subjective becoming across and between dis/abled, gendered and racialized bodies constituted through the provision and receipt of care.

Similar concerns are present in recent work on learning disability (Hall, 2013; Power 2008, 2013). Power (2013), for example, draws attention to the ways in which care services for people with learning disabilities, such as day centres and group accommodation, are being gradually phased out, with users encouraged instead to participate in broader local environments of caring', making 'natural connections' (68) with others in everyday spaces (see also Wiesel and Bigby, 2014). While an emphasis on people belonging to, and acting within, everyday places is to be welcomed, Power (2013) cautions that a sense of belonging is not easily achieved, requiring significant and carefully negotiated work by family members, support workers and

people with disabilities themselves. While not couched explicitly in this language, Power's

concerns might be understood as addressing the nature and extent of the relations people will be

able to cultivate, the kinds of affective intensities that are created and circulated in these spaces

(e.g. joy, happiness, anger, frustration, fear), and the forms of subjective becoming made

possible. Thinking in this way raises important political questions about the organization of

health and social care systems as assemblages, and how these might be changed to 'create ways

of living differently' (Lim, 2010: 2407).

## IV Critical Geographies of the 'Able-Body'

In this final substantive section of the paper we move beyond the becomings of disabled bodies,

to consider what relationality and NRT can offer to a critical geography of the *able*-body.

Chouinard et al (2010) noted that the focus on disability has meant inattention to the 'normality'

of ability, 'While there has long been recognition that the privileges of the able-body and mind

are reproduced through the oppression of the disabled 'other', there have been few attempts to

systematically unpack these 'able' categories' (17). In response, they posed three questions:

'How are able-bodiedness and able-mindedness produced as geographically and historically

contingent constructs? What types of knowledge, practices and spaces are implicated in their

reproduction? How might they be destabilised?' Geographers have yet to address these

questions, and they have only recently begun to receive attention in disability studies (Campbell,

2009; Goodley, 2014). Yet efforts to develop a critical account of ability are essential in efforts

to challenge ableism and to make possible other forms of subjective becoming that do not begin

from the binary opposition of the de/valued dis/abled body. Here we identify two paths that

might provide the bases for such an account. The first draws on recent work in disability studies

to explore the potential to unsettle or 'queer' the able-body. The second develops a broader

conception of relational dependency in which able-bodied becomings can be understood as

'needy' endeavours.

*Unsettling the able-body*

In recent work, Goodley (2014) develops what he terms a 'critical ableist approach' to

acknowledge and confront the beliefs, values and practices through which the 'normal' able self

is imagined and enacted, and the relations and environments through which it becomes. In earlier

writing, he summarises what he sees as the dominant facets of the able self: 'cognitively, socially

and emotionally able and competent; biologically and psychologically stable …hearing, mobile,

seeing, walking; sane, autonomous, self-sufficient …economically viable' (Goodley, 2011: 79).

It is against this set of deeply embedded characteristics that bodies are valued, judged and

deemed to be within or outside the realm of 'ability'. Echoing Gleeson's (1999) materialist

analysis, and in some way answering Chouinard et al's (2010) first question set out above,

Goodley (2014) sees these dominant notions of ability emergent within the 'ecosystem' of

neoliberalism, concluding that 'the functioning neoliberal self is an able-bodied and minded one'

(28); as such, able bodies are aligned with dominant cultural notions of competence, stability and

independence.

While *no-one* can satisfy all of the above criteria of ability, and *everyone* is in some way

incompetent, unstable and dependent, such is its cultural dominance that this is not enough to

unsettle or disrupt the able-body. Sothern (2007) cites 'crip theory', a fusion of critiques from

queer theory and disability studies (McRuer, 2006), as a possible means to unsettle the able body

through challenging the mutually reinforcing connection between heteronormativity and able-

bodiedness. In his study of 'sex manuals' aimed at disabled people, Sothern (2007) argues that,

while the manuals are positive in their celebration of disabled sexuality (so often denied), they

remain focused on sex as an individualised (and neoliberalised) practice of self-governance.

Sothern (2007) objects to such uncritical normalisation, what he refers to as the desire to seek

'safe passage over the river of ableism and heteronormativity to some promised land of liberal

inclusion' (157); instead, he continues 'we must blow up the bridge!' (ibid.). Crip theory can

disrupt the normality or naturalness of able-bodied neoliberal, individualised sex (and so let

*everyone* 'off the hook'), and further, can contribute to the dismantling of ableism itself, by

broadening the scope of what it is to be human. Inspired by queer theory's commitment to non-

definable, becoming (sexual) subjectivities, a crip perspective recognises the 'fluid,

intersectional, and contingent articulations of bodies, cultures and power' (Elman, 2012: 318,

cited in Goodley, 2014: 38-9); *all* bodies are emergent, unfinished and relational (with other

bodies and objects), shaped by everyday practices of affect and desire, yet within the constraints

and contexts of dominant sociospatial-cultural constructions of dis/ability.

There are useful parallels between Sothern's approach to 'cripping' the able-body and

Saldanha's (2007) groundbreaking work on unsettling or 'freaking' whiteness. For Saldanha,

freaking whiteness entails a proliferation of race. In this way: 'race's energies are then directed at

multiplying racial differences, so as to render them joyfully cacophonic… When racial

formations crumble and mingle like this, the dominance of whiteness in the global racial

assemblage is undermined' (2007: 199). In similar fashion, drawing attention to the shifting and

prolific diversity of bodily sizes and forms, sensory acuities, cognitive abilities, mental states,

illnesses, injuries and other differences begins to undo the taken-for-granted dualism between a

valued able-body and its disabled 'other'. Recent work on fatness offers one example of such a

proliferation. Longhurst (2010) shows that becoming 'fat' is an intensely intercorporeal and

intersubjective experience. Women in her study spoke of the social stigmatisation of their bodies

by people, objects and spaces (e.g. staff, chairs and changing rooms in clothes shops) (see also

Colls and Evans, 2014). Yet fatness refuses categorisation within the dis/ability dualism; fat

bodies are neither 'able' in the terms dictated by society (see above) nor are they easily classified

as disabled. In this way such bodies disrupt the dis/ability dualism, directing our attention instead

to the experiences and becomings of people with diverse body shapes and capabilities.

*Towards an affirmative conception of dependency*

A second path is concerned with what a relational approach might offer to our understanding of

the 'able-body' and its dependencies. Central to a relational/material approach is an

understanding that bodies are capable of action only to the extent that they enter into relations

with other human/non-human bodies. Certain kinds of relations – the combining of bodies and

the kindling of certain affective intensities – may exhibit tendencies that enhance a body's ability

to act, while others may constrain or shut down the potential for action (Adkins, 2015: 97; also

Ruddick, 2012). As Fox (2002: 356) suggests, these affective relations are myriad in nature,

reflecting multiple forces: 'of biology, of environment, of culture and reflexivity and of the

aspirational potential which all living things possess'. To the extent that new connections

enhance a body's capacity to act, they create the potential to actualize new ways of becoming.

Dewsbury (2011) uses the relationship between bicycle and human cyclist as an example

of these processes. Drawing on Raunig (2010), he suggests that the flow between bicycle and

cyclist is constitutive of an intensive environment in which the mingling of bodies affords and

generates 'the capacity for, and territory within which, that individual develops new modes of

movement and social interaction' (150). Over time, repeated and increasingly habitual enactment

of biking stabilizes this assemblage, and it is these habitual activities 'through which we discern

our place in the world and autopoietically gain our definition at the same time' (151).

There are interesting parallels between Dewsbury's (2011) account and work by Jonasson

(2014) on the AKKA board, a mobility device for people with significant physical impairments.[2]

For Jonasson, movement is produced 'inter-corporeally' as the disabled person, care providers,

the AKKA board and the material surroundings combine. As Jonasson notes, in one sense the

experience might be thought to produce greater individual choice and independence but in

practice it is 'difficult to separate the AKKA board from the person using it and the person

preparing its path' (2014: 487). What is accomplished is collaborative, provisional and

relationally embedded. Subjective experience emerges across the intensive environment formed

by the co-mingling of both human and non-human bodies.

Drawing these parallels between different forms of subjective becoming (both of which

occur in relation to different types of 'assistive technology') is significant if we understand the

creation of both intensive environments in terms of *dependency*. In other words, such an

approach recognizes the way in which all bodies depend on combinations and connections with

others to act and subjectively become. We recognize that this is not the only way to critically

approach issues of in/dependence. Feminist scholarship on ethics of care has conceived of care

not only as a set of practical acts, but also as a set of relations between people (e.g., Popke, 2006;

Lawson, 2007; Cox, 2010; Atkinson et al, 2011). Yet Atkinson et al (2011: 570) caution that

even within a feminist ethic of care that values interdependency, 'dependency and vulnerability

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[2] Jonasson (2014) characterizes the AKKA-board as a mobility device that is formerly classified as an electric wheelchair but one that is primarily used by persons with more significant disabilities who require a control system that is different from the traditional wheelchair. It runs by following a laid out circuit of electrical tape on the floor, using cameras positioned underneath the device. As Jonasson notes, the operation of the device involves more than just the driver; it also enrols parents, institutional staff and others in a 'creative' process.

still bear negative connotations and reproduce dominant ideas, theoretical categories and subjectivities that continue to devalue care'. These authors argue that there is a need for ongoing work to challenge such enduring conceptions of dependency. We argue here that foregrounding the relational nature of becoming, and the extent to which all bodies desire and depend upon connections with other human and non-human bodies, provides one way to advance what might be understood as an *affirmative* conception of dependency.

This effort to extend a condition of relational dependency is not meant to imply a denial of bodily difference or a 'universalist sensibility' (Tolia-Kelly, 2005) that fails to acknowledge the fields of force that limit the capacities and potentialities of different bodies (Colls, 2012). It necessitates careful attention to the mechanisms through which disabled bodies continue to be positioned in Campbell's (2005: 109) terms as 'ontologically intolerable'. Such an effort will also need to recognize the varying capacities of different bodies. This attention to difference comes through clearly in Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) discussion of bodily becoming. Here, they argue that what a body can do is determined by its longitude and latitude, where 'latitude is made up of intensive parts falling under a capacity, and longitude of extensive parts falling under a relation (256-257). In this view, the nature of a body is determined by both the multiplicity of different (intensive) parts that make it up and those other 'parts' - bodies, things, objects - with which it is able to enter into a relation. While recognizing the differences among bodies with respect to their intensive parts and capacities, this approach rejects a physiological understanding of bodies in terms of 'organs and functions' in favour of an ethical approach in which: 'the organic characteristics *derive from* longitude and its relations, from latitude and its degrees' (257). What this line of thinking offers is a framework for disability geography to systematically examine the dependencies that underlie 'able-bodied' becoming. This entails making clear the

neediness of such bodies, and concurrently directing critical attention to the assemblages in and through which these relational dependencies are enacted and sustained.

Recent scholarship on mobility provides one example of such work. Cresswell (2010; 2012) has made a strong case for the importance of mobility as a major resource in contemporary social life, with the differential distribution of this resource playing a central role in 'the production of social hierarchies' (2012: 651). Mobility scholarship has begun to unpack forms of taken-for-granted movement. Work on mundane mobilities, for example, points to the practical and geographical competencies that allow people 'to meet for pleasure, get to work on time, and pick the kids up on time' (Binnie et al, 2007: 166; also Middleton, 2010). Yet, as disability scholars have effectively demonstrated, not all people are able to enact these competencies in the context of built environments and transportation systems that actively exclude 'bodies that d[o] not fit with expectations of dominant 'normal' shape and ability' (Andrews et al 2012: 1928).

A relational approach directs critical attention to the apparent 'ease' and naturalness with which certain non-impaired bodies move. In turn, this provides a way to question 'conceptions of the mobile subject *as the embodiment of* the physiological norms of the able body' (Imrie, 2012: 2261, emphasis added). Instead, we can approach mobile 'able bodied' subjectivity as something that emerges across a series of dependencies - upon other people, on assistive technologies, on prosthetics, on transportation systems, and material environments that are attuned to the intensive capacities of specific bodies (e.g., Imrie, 2012; Andrews et al, 2012).

This approach may be particularly provocative when applied to the question of walking, given that the capacity to engage in this 'simple' act has been understood as central to being/becoming fully human (and masculine) (see Cresswell, 2010). As Ingold's (2004) fascinating account demonstrates, however, varieties of (human) walking abound and these

emerge from, and are constitutive of, specific socio-cultural contexts. On this basis, he argues

that there is no: 'essential body plan, given for all humans in advance of the conditions of their

life in the world… There is no standard form of the human foot, or of bipedal locomotion, apart

from the forms that actually take shape in the course of routine pedestrian operations (336).

Moreover, Ingold's work demonstrates the *relational* nature of these routine pedestrian

operations. Tracing the emergence of a particular type of European walking, he argues that its

enactment was dependent upon particular kinds of prosthetics (e.g., leather boots and shoes) that

changed the form of the foot, and the creation of particular material environments that: 'literally

paved the way for the boot-clad pedestrian to exercise his feet as a stepping machine' (326). As

such, this work provides a useful one example of how we might shed light on able-bodied

becoming.


**V Conclusion**

Our aim in this paper has been to push for further engagement with relational thinking in the

geographies of disability. Specifically, we have tried to highlight and extend explicit conceptual

linkages between key elements of non-representational theory and emerging work by disability

scholars. Notwithstanding the limits of a single paper, our hope is that these linkages and

provocations will spur further discussion and debate in this field of study. In this conclusion, we

draw attention to some of the conceptual, political, methodological and empirical implications

that arise from the preceding discussion.

    Conceptually, we have deliberately focused attention in this paper on the ways in which

NRT's emphasis on the immanent materiality of social life – the 'doings' of bodies in relation

with other bodies, objects and space – offers provocative ways of thinking through disabled and

non-disabled becoming. At the same time, we are conscious of the limits and shortcomings of

this approach. As one example, the privileging of doing over knowing – what Barnett (2008: 89)

identifies as the ontological privileging of affect as a pre-conscious 'priming to act' in recent

NRT work – risks eschewing the importance of conscious interpretation and representation as

processes through which subjects are affected by, make sense of, and act in the world (see also

Pile, 2010; Andrews et al, 2014). This is particularly salient given that representations of

dis/ability continue to shape in profound ways what specific bodies can or cannot do in specific

material environments and relational encounters. Recent work on transportation planning, for

example, shows that disabled people's needs and capacities are often excluded from, or

misrepresented within, design consultations and planning documents that inform changes to

material environments (Bromley et al., 2007; Van Hoven and Elzinga, 2009; Imrie, 2012). These

representations embody enduring assumptions about the kinds of bodies and the types of

movement that are deemed appropriate within the public space of the city, and are thus critical to

sustaining the broader material assemblages in and through which im/mobilities are enacted.

Moving forward, more attention is needed to the ways in which the embodied actions and

interactions that underlie subjective becoming are inextricably and inferentially (cf. Barnett,

2008) linked to myriad representations of dis/ability.

The relational focus of NRT also poses a number of challenges for disability politics. As

Macpherson (2010) cautions, the 'sceptical humanism' of NRT may not sit well with the

pragmatic political aims of disability scholarship and activism, which have often been grounded

in 'authentic' accounts of a disabled subject. However, we would argue that there are ways in

which this sceptical humanism can be drawn upon to expand and reinvigorate disability politics.

In particular, the decentering of the subject in NRT connects in important ways with recent work

on learning/ intellectual disability that has problematized the 'autonomous individual' as political

actor. A prevailing ideology of a stable subject operating within a framework of individual rights

has clearly empowered some disabled people – for example, claiming their place in higher

education, and securing personalised packages of support. Yet the insistence on independence

and autonomy as a basis for a disability politics fails to accommodate the range of embodied

capacities possessed by a diverse population of disabled people. More fundamentally, it fails to

acknowledge that all persons (both disabled and non-disabled) depend to a greater or lesser

extent on human and non-human others for their capacity to act.

In place of an authentic subject, a relational material approach encourages a shift towards

a disability politics based on *practice*. This is articulated by Elizabeth Grosz (2005: 88), drawing

from Deleuze, who argues that the political struggles of subjugated peoples should be understood

as: 'as struggles for practice, struggles at the level of the pragmatic, struggles around the right to

act, do and make'. A shift from identity to practice also directs attention to the nature of, and

potential for, political alliances between disabled people and diverse human and non-human

others in the pursuit of more enabling and inclusive social formations. As Leitner and Strunk

(2014) suggest in their work on immigrant advocacy, shifting connections between different

groups, organizations, places and strategies can themselves be approached as complex political

assemblages. Such an approach might be usefully adopted to explore, for example, the shifting

relations that exist between disabled people, advocacy organizations, family members, charities,

support workers, labour unions, state institutions and other bodies working to shape the

conditions of everyday life.

Methodologically, to the extent that we give analytical attention to the non-

representational whether this is the agentic capacity of material objects and environments or the

pre-conscious affects that move bodies to act, this will require methodological approaches that

move beyond the collection of 'representable' personal testimony to capture the ways which

bodies are moved to in/action within specific fields of force. Macpherson's (2010) own use of

ethnography offers an excellent illustration of such an approach, providing access to the

embodied practice of walking (see also Macpherson and Bleasdale, 2012; Fox and Macpherson,

2015). Elsewhere, Bigby and Wiesel (2011; also Wiesel et al 2013) use 'mobile' observation to

document encounters between intellectually disabled people and non-disabled others in public

spaces of the city. This work offers important insight on the materiality of encounters (e.g. how

bodies attract or repel one another, what facial expressions might un/intentionally convey) that

moves beyond what is or is not said. Moreover, efforts to move beyond 'authentic' narratives of

subjective experience may have positive consequences for those who have been positioned

outside of what is conventionally 'representable'. As Wiesel et al (2013: 2395) note: 'the method

of observation allowed us to include in the study people with more severe intellectual disability

or complex communication needs who would have difficulty communicating their experiences in

an interview'.

Finally, the preceding discussion of the 'able-body' suggests that we need to think

creatively about ways to empirically document the kinds of knowledge, relational practices and

social spaces implicated in the process of *becoming able*. While there are many potential

directions here, we have suggested two possible avenues for future work. The first of these,

concerned with the proliferation of dis/ability, suggests that we need to give further empirical

attention to the sheer diversity of embodied experiences that overwhelm any binary opposition

between a normative 'able-body' and its disabled other. Important work in this regard has

already been completed on emotional difficulties (Holt, 2010b), chronic and episodic physical

illness (Stone et al. 2014), and obesity (Longhurst, 2010), but more work is needed to highlight the multiplicity of bodies that come to be understood as 'able'. Second, a focus on relational dependencies suggests that we need to make explicit the specific relational connections and material contexts that allow 'able bodies' to act with apparent ease.

## Acknowledgements

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