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Posted Date: 19 August 2025

doi: 10.20944/preprints202508.1390.v1

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Article

Thinking Love Through Abled-Bodiedness: An Impossible Otherness?

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Abstract

This essay discusses abled-bodiedness, desire and love, based on self-reflections and insights from previous relationships and literature from disability studies. I discuss socio-historic constructions of abled-bodiedness, highlighting its historical specificity, analytical visibility, and de-naturalisation. By “Otherising” abled-bodiedness, we can contest its ableist mechanisms in our cosmology and society. The narrative in this paper is personal and subjective, based on affective encounters with partners with disabilities and neuro-diversities. I hope to contribute to a better understanding of ableism as a system, its influence and impact on notions of relationship, emotion, and affection.

Keywords: disability; otherness; emotions; sexuality; abled-bodiedness

1. Introduction

Ableism can be defined as a system orienting privileging attitudes and discourses of abled-bodied individuals. Its tangible effects can result in socio-economic and cultural disadvantages for people with disabilities. One of the many ways ableism survives is by denying its own existence and genesis, posing as a natural occurrence, an evolutionary premise legitimatising its power. Disability is then on the other side of this power duality. Where ability is the norm, disability is deficiency, and abled-bodied agency presumed natural, avoiding any critical investigation. This hierarchical dualism is still present nowadays: hysteria and misogynistic studies still influence gender and womanhood in society [1], and post-war eugenics hidden behind nationalism and racialised policies that echo the difficulty in understanding aversive and subjective ableism, as Friedman [2] shows by the difficulty in researching subjective and objective ableist attitudes. By denying its own invention and evolution, ableism presents itself as a cultural optimum to subdue and order an alleged “unregimented” natural world [3].

Against such premises, I hope to contribute to critical studies reclaiming disability's place in history beyond pathological and paternalistic projections [4]. To localise, name, and explore ableism/abled-bodiedness as a concept and influential cosmology, to deny its atemporality and self-proclaimed power. By “otherising” abled-bodiedness, we expose its cracks, shifting the focus of power of what is still considered hegemonic and what is considered marginal - a dualism of us/others that negates the history and contributions of people with disabilities in history.

I aim to collaborate to the development of disability studies by exploring abled-bodiedness as a system and how it can inform dynamics of desire and conflict. In naming abled-bodiedness as the ‘other’, it is made visible and localised in space, exposing its artificiality and development [5], exploring and criticising its theoretical, political and social negative impact on society.

2. Methodology and Rationale: Alterity and Otherness

The reflections in this essay came from a course in Anthropology of Emotions and discussions with colleagues. It is a reflective exercise, focusing on abled-bodiedness from my perspective as an abled-bodied gay person. Disability is discussed in its ontological and/or phenomenological aspects informed by literature review and subjective reflections. I explore dynamics of power, emotion, and

desire in the construction of abled-bodiedness and disability, and how ableism influences practices and dynamics of love and relationship. Part of this paper is a reflective exercise on how trauma was a big part of a past relationship, and how it informed our identities and my perception of how his identity was informed by his disability. The lenses of trauma, beyond our own consciousness of the mechanisms driving it, influenced much of how we navigated our environment, surroundings and negotiations around desire, romance and sociability. I found myself projecting a lot of our disagreements and fallouts on his side of the trauma, as if fighting the need for a totalitarian explanation of our issues based on the physical and cultural aspects of his disability. This paper is partially an exercise to understand such dynamics and the in-between of individual vs. societal factors around disability and ableism and how we navigate it beyond reinforcing and/or 'otherising' non-hegemonic identities.

The anthropological concept of "otherness" attempts to create a half-mirror between worlds, approximating and distancing people and groups, influencing change or reaffirming one's cultural specificities [6]. Oftentimes, it leads to conflict, contesting established ideas and structures, leading to either retrenchment of beliefs or revolutions [7]. Cultural contact is constituted by enmeshed lines, contradictory paths and influential encounters. It is a dynamic and alive process, hard to capture but theoretically. "Otherising" abled-bodiedness can be a fruitful exercise, and this essay is only one of the many possible attempts to understand its dynamic genesis and development. At the same time, it is important to remember that this dynamic aspect of culture alerts us to what McRuer [8] calls the problems of distributive justice and the danger of masking systemic contradictions that otherness and alterity attempts can bring about (pp. 114-115). This means looking beyond any type of disability theory, social, biomedical or even cultural, as limitations to our embodied selves go beyond such realms: upbringing, neurodiversity aspects, social influences, past and future socio-economic contexts and the many unpredictable and dynamic variables that social sciences can privilege as static elements. To do that is to "... pluralize the ways we understand bodily instability [9] (pp. 7).

My side of this cultural mirror does not shield me from criticism and shortcomings, and I am not excluded from direct and indirect privileges of ableism. The exercise of understanding identities and dynamics from privileged spaces helps us to better understand social, historical and practical relationships between disability and abled-bodiedness [10] (pp. 140). I hope to contribute, from an abled-bodied perspective, with Lakshmi's 'unmasking of the erotic' [11] (pp. 240), exposing the power dynamics of ableism and its myth of wholeness, contesting the many futures in spite and beyond abled-bodiedness.

As a concept, alterity is useful in understanding social life and transformation, beyond academia and into "real life". Emotion and subjectivity are socio-cultural elements constitutive of alterity, of our different practices and beliefs. Emotions and feelings are a language, part of one's identity and lexicon for interacting and perceiving the world. Jimeno [12] shows how concepts of kindness and sympathy influence social perceptions of people with disability, ignoring identitarian diversity, evoking essentialism and assistentialism. Emotions are territories of dispute [13], impacting dynamics of gender, ethnicity, class and more. Ideas, seen as logical or natural, are accepted as legitimate or relegated to marginality through power struggles and historical conflicts.

Ideas about intimacy, emotional expectations and desire have a specific genesis, influencing construction of ideas and practices of abled-bodiedness. The concept of otherness is here inverted and attributed to abled-bodiedness as the other side of this half-mirror between "normality" and deviance. It will be used as a compass to explore cartographies of emotion and desire and how ableism seeps into such spaces. Through this exercise, I hypothesised 5 mechanisms from my personal experience and research, exploring their influence on abled-bodied perceptions of disability and affectivity. I hope it will add to the existing movement of making ableism/abled-bodiedness a topic of investigation itself, 'de-otherising' disability and deconstructing the dualistic aspect of abled/disabled and its power dynamics.

3. Dynamics of Love, Power, and Intimacy: Selective Positioning

What I initially thought to be a critical exercise, this attempt to understand disability, love and trauma, showed itself to be a form of acritical projection, biased on my experiences as an abled-bodied person, and it was acritical as there is little self-reflection when one grows up abled-bodied. It is not even an 'identity' itself outside of very specific academic circles. Meanwhile, there is an amount of direct and indirect symbolic and archival productions around disability, with most still informed by prejudice and negative aspects that survive and persist from our past and present practices.

As Fichten and Robillard posits [14], this is a form of identity projection, simplifying one's belief and emotional development to an impairment or condition: "[...] negative attitudes toward a handicapped person's disability are often generalized to nonimpaired characteristics of the individual and finally to the entire person". (pp. 199).

Such projection distinguishes the difference between disability and impairment but is also critical of how they are still seen as analogous in society, which denies the dynamic nature of disability as part of and an identity itself. If unacknowledged, ableist acts risk being seen as individual practices and "mistakes", not as the persistent socio-historic system it is, such as racism, misogyny, xenophobia, and other social malaises still existing in society. The failure to recognise their systemic nature can lead to a false sense of empathy and heightened sense of self. Privileged groups in these systems might fail to recognise how they benefit from this inequality, and "well-intentioned" support and allyship are at risk of becoming patronising towards people with disabilities [15]. It can also lead to discourses and policies of institutional dependency when people from marginalised groups internalise such discourse of "burdenship" [16].

Rainey's idea of burdenship connects to an ex-partner and his vocalised insecurity towards the quality and duration of our relationship. He expressed the idea of feeling "like a burden" to me, a fear that increased as our relationship progressed. The lack of universal design and accessibility to places of leisure impacted this as in his view, our leisure options as a couple were limited to his disability. This was more striking during our initial stages, as his frustration was directed at himself, and not towards an ableist architecture and society. I found myself in-between the place of the lover enjoying the journey of getting to know him, but also as a "politically engaged" person who should manner his thoughts and expressions in specific matters, mindful of our asymmetric positions in different areas of culture and society. This in-betweenness illustrates one mechanism of ableism I name "selective positioning", which can be neutral or positive.

An ableist system allows for abled-bodied people to feign equality through a false (intended or not) sense of empathy. This can happen through a selective and/or tactical stance of support towards disability equality. Lacking such stance is not a negative thing, as abled-bodied privilege allows guiltless. Ableism can dress allyship as a positive thing, a praise, instead of equality being understood as a basic attitude we should all have in dignifying way in a human rights-led society. Hence, relationships between a person with disabilities and an abled-bodied person can be asymmetric and amplify privileging mechanisms to some. Such selectiveness is not only seldom negative, unless expressed outrightly through violence, verbal or physical, but can be a tool for control by abled-bodied people. Such control, and its socio-political origins, are not always talked about or accepted when discussing relationships. The ideal of romantic love tend to privilege the subjectivity of intimacy, not its logic and historicity, especially when these point to conflicts and unsettling argumentations. For instance, such control and privilege can be activated by neglect ("I'm still learning about disability, take it easy on me") or ignoring our own lack of empathy and understanding by blaming the other person, overlooking disability, race, and/or gender's effect on their self-esteem and outcomes in life.

Hidden Vulnerability, Visible Disability

The second ableist mechanism I discuss relates to how intimacy is influenced by strong socio-political markers. Intimacy and attraction can rely on many subconscious factors we are unaware of,

which can generate vulnerability and insecurity. This exposes what I call a “vulnerability/visibility” mechanism, something I felt developing as my relationship progressed. Considering disability as the sole factor in people’s sociability through an ideal-type approach, visible disabilities share less cultural elements, to choose from and form social bonds, strategically or not [17]. Abled-bodiedness has developed more visibility and representational archives through history. Hence, emotional displays, creativity and combinations tend to be unequal in abled/disabled dynamics.

The last characteristic of this second mechanism relates to public perception of visible disabilities, and how it restrains strategies of disclosure and other strategies people with disabilities might want to employ based on their circumstances. For instance, public displays of affection are perceived differently by society if a person has a disability and the other does not, even if the other person has a hidden disability. The weight of social judgement will be unequal among the individuals engaging in such displays. Like selective positioning, this is a mechanism that privileges abled-bodiedness, including the possibility to exercise empathy towards disability rights, or works towards equality when developing an intimate relationship – reinforcing the rewarding of allyship from abled-bodied people and privilege maintenance.

Politics of Caring and Gender

The third mechanism discussed here influences dynamics of care and expectations. Such dynamics are influenced by shared language, emotions and cultural aspects we build upon in our lifetime [18]. Cultural codes are shared and communicated, prone to noise and misunderstandings. Expectations vary between partners, and ableism can add to this communication noise, barriers and conflictive encounters. Alongside other markers influencing alterity, abled-bodiedness adds to this complex layer, thinning the line between care and patronisation.

I highlight two aspects of care and love that affect alterity encounters in complex ways: firstly, the historic association of expected care from female family members towards siblings with disabilities [19]. Such association informs social perception of gender roles and ignores how interdependency is a general aspect of human communities. The second aspect is a follow-up of the first, where such gendered roles play a negative role in the dynamics of care in gay relationships, by associating vulnerability, masculinity, and disability [20]. Asymmetric relationships of power in society influence our own behaviours and intentions towards intimacy and love.

Ward [21] (pp. 172) discusses paternalising attitudes in the ethics of care, and the risk of reinforcing discourses of passivity associated with people receiving care. Such view of care as a negative thing or representing passivity and powerlessness is a historically and socio-economically informed representation of gender roles misrepresenting the actuality of our ethics of care:

[...] using an ethic of care analysis to critique this perspective, and to highlight aspects of interdependence (rather than autonomy) and reciprocity, disrupts the discourse that creates such binaries and the drivers that compartmentalise and essentialise people either as care givers or care receivers; it provides a space in which to demonstrate interdependence and to unmask the artificial boundaries of care.

Influenced by this binarism and unrealistic historicity, politics of care are waters hard to navigate, especially in relationships where each part have unequal privileges and opportunities. The concept of care goes beyond such restricted view of dependency. Instead, true politics of care are based on the idea of interdependency as a human dictum, applicable to social and/or intimate relationships.

Asymmetries between gender discourses and acts of care constitute this gendered mechanism in an ableist system. Even more so when abled-bodied people are perceived as “carers” in all scenarios, as a monolithic independent group. In this sense, my social constitution as an abled-bodied man benefits from this fictional projection of disability as synonym to dependency, enabling abled-bodied people to be socially validated as carers/providers. It also ignores how vulnerability is a general marker of humanity [22], de-legitimising hidden disabilities and neurodiversities in the public eye.

The idea of people with disabilities always needing “care”, as well as the devalued role and contribution of women in our society, act as a pervasive double discourse in gay relationships. In my personal experience, such combination could have been responsible for feelings of emasculation from my partner, due to the still pervasive association in gay sexuality between the “top” (the one who penetrates) and the “bottom” (the one who is penetrated). This dualism is analogous to the idea of giver/receiver, another perceived unequal distribution of power and possibility in the relationship. This fictional, yet influential idea that disabled bodies are constituted by loss, either of autonomy or masculinity, negatively influences self-esteem and possibilities of intimacy marked by alterity [23].

Affective Responsibility and Ableism

Affective responsibility is a controversial debate, relatively new to social media and secondary literature and unexplored academically. Dating apps generated a lot of attention and discussion towards accountability in our current fast-paced dating environment. Terms like “ghosting”, “breadcrumbing” and others have been coined to increase awareness, dialogue and discussion around negative effects of online dating. It is currently a common way to meet people, especially within the LGBTQI+ community [24], a phenomenon still understudied by the academic community. Still, some studies analyse how race and class, for instance, plays a role in the dynamics of online dating among gay men. According to Conner [20], there is a “gay gayze” influenced by mainstream ideas of beauty that materialises itself in dating preferences and public discourses on desire. The easy access and availability of people in dating apps can contribute to entrench this. The fourth mechanism I discuss relates to this structuring of desires and beauty through mainstreamed constructions of masculinity and male aesthetics. It is a mechanism that connects ideas of ableism and affective responsibility, consciously or not, conditioning notions of manhood, erogenicity, attraction, romantic and/or erotic encounters. Such encounters, beyond the gaze of normality, can help pave the way for individual and collective empowerment, by unmasking the many futures self-discoveries and eroticism can bring about beyond abled-bodiedness [11] (pp. 16).

Sankowski [25] traces the evolution of this debate about emotional responsibility in history. Morality is an ever-changing concept, difficult to pinpoint its transformations through influence from many variables, such as religion, familyhood, socio-economic development, and more. Our senses and expectations of morality change in time and space. For Sankowski, desires and feelings are a constant negotiation navigating these and many other factors. Time, for instance, is a major discussion in disability studies, as economical systems influence our day-to-day beyond capitalist productivity. This asymmetric perception and ‘ownership’ of time has been receiving attention from critical disability and crip studies but there are still many connections of its relationship with class, ethnicity, gender, identity, etc., and much more to be explored [9] (pp. 34). Directing this discussion towards ideas of romance and relationship, we can enquire about the barriers that people with disabilities and/or neurodiverse characteristics might face compared to others. For instance, how much one’s economic struggles affect their free time and mental capacity to engage in a relationship and seek connection with other individuals. If we think of how many experiences of disability, socially and individually, are historically marked by biomedical needs, will such upbringing have denied or negatively impacted non-material needs such as romantic and sexual desires? And, by the same token, how much of the free time that ‘abled-bodied’ people have, when not constrained by such needs, will be used to develop empathy and compassion for others, disabled or not, who might not share these privileges? Such empathy, or adhesion to a possible crip time

[...] might mean recognizing that people will arrive at various intervals, and designing [events] accordingly; and it might also mean recognizing that [people] are processing language at various rates and adjusting the pace of a conversation. It is this notion of flexibility (not just ‘extra’ time)” that matters (Ibid, 44).

To understand how much power they have over people is not possible, but [26] see power (in its connection to already mentioned variables) as a defining feature of which values will be more socially accepted and/or validated than others. This also influences access to privileges and

opportunities for some groups. For instance, the lack of representation of LGBTQI+ diversity in dating apps, as well as racism and classism, are influential in such dynamics of power, choice, resources and morality. Or, in straight-oriented dating apps, the perception that women are outnumbered by men and hence, have their choices restricted. Online dating is a divisive phenomenon in constant update parallel to the ever-changing relationship between virtual and social interactions, with discourses on love and intimacy transforming themselves alongside it.

Giddens [27] separates love into two ideal types: love-as-passion and love-as-romance. The main idea of each type is the degree of expectation and freedom they carry in its narrative. Romance carries more social expectations, and passion is expressed in more individual and intimate ways. Our access or restriction to certain privileges, our unconscious bias and expectations change or reaffirm values and morals available in our environment. Such an environment is informed by these dynamics of power discussed above. A lack of accessibility, regular services, work opportunities, education and leisure make social and individual integration harder for people with disabilities, resulting into isolation, loneliness and lack of self-esteem for underrepresented groups [28]. Hence, otherness and alterity are dependent on shared geo-social spaces through positive integration, and intimacy and love are still being influenced by segregation and inaccessibility in broader contexts.

Interracial heterosexual relationships and disclosure are an interesting intersectional example to think love-as-passion and love-as-romance in their individual/social problematic encounter. Herman and Campbell [29] analyses how attitudes towards interracial relationships are still marked by racism and conflict, where family influence can shape one's inclinations. Racist perceptions of intimacy can categorise people as "dating material", someone chosen to be a formal relationship, publicly and intimately. Or it can categorise people as hidden lovers, someone who is sexualised and fetishised for intimate encounters with no disclosure to friends and family, due to their individual characteristics.

The idea of being accountable for one's emotions is biased by the opportunities and experiences we have in developing such ability and self-awareness. The lack of social opportunities influences the access to positive representations for disadvantaged groups, which can have a mirroring effect of one's own notion of self and belonging. This navigation of desire, social and individual influence, and how affective responsibility is crossed by discourses of love, is constitutive of this fourth mechanism. In summary, ableism privileges representation and emotional development of certain groups, whilst denying the same access to others, enables paternalisation in relationships marked by unequal access to power and representation. As with the first mechanism, empathy, much like emotional responsibility, is an ableist privilege.

Fifth Mechanism: the Intersectional Aspect of Intimacy

Intersectionality was a term coined to understand intersections of gender, class, and race [30]. It has evolved into a broader framework, helpful to understand social life markers and their multiple interactions and crossings. Relationships, intimate or not, or marked by social markers we embody and share in geo-social landscapes, either through reinvention, reinforcement, propagation, and shared symbols. In turn, this also influences the availability of resources to different groups and people, based on their position, privileges and barriers. As Mayers [31] posits, disability, sexuality and affection are realms seldom explored, considered unimportant in terms of representation, limiting access to resources even more. There is no univocality when discussing identity and belonging in the disabled/neurodiverse community, and creative sectors are still far from achieving equality in representing diversity [32]. Meanwhile, representation, and resources for exploring intimacy and love as abled-bodied people are mainstreamed and readily available. This disparity in geo-social influence, representation, and access influences the process of alterity negatively, making equality through otherness a difficult process. The spatial separation between gay abled-bodied people and gays with disabilities is also a conceptual separation, a negative influence in the encounter with otherness. The lack of representations of disability and sexuality itself is a factor limiting the

scope and diversity of representations and symbolic productions for the LGBTQI+ disabled community.

Such limitations are constitutive of this fifth mechanism, curbing the spontaneity of affective encounters through spatial limitation and lack of accessibility. It also limits the resources available for self-exploring desires and intimate experiences if you are not abled-bodied. Cruising and cottaging spaces, for instance, have historically served as hubs for intimate encounters among men, a hybrid space of freedom but also repression and shame from the law and public shame [33]. Another space lacking representation and inclusiveness is pornography, a complex discussion touching on body positivity, fetishisation and how people with disabilities are far from being empowered through such spaces [34]. Although a controversial debate, such spaces can help to discover and explore one's desires, something that historically have been a privileged of abled-bodied men. Such spaces, with all its contradictions, were and still are an important space in terms of self-discovery and archival production of one's sexuality and identity.

Andersson, Campkin, and Greenaway [35] discuss disability and intimacy through accounts of abled-bodied men utilising accessible toilets for cottaging (sexual encounters in public toilets), appropriating a space meant for people with disabilities. Cruising spaces, which are sexual encounters in public areas, are also defined by inaccessibility to people with disabilities, and much like dogging, tend to also be an ableist privileging space for sexual exploration. Gay spaces are configured (in the case of cottaging or cruising) with ableist predispositions in mind, making them less welcoming to other groups aside from abled-bodied gay men [36]. Geo-spatiality is a factor that influences all mechanisms discussed in this paper, intentionally or unintentionally, creating environments with social, geographical, and romantic/emotional limitations for groups with different levels of access and privilege.

For people with disabilities, tokenization and added labour increases the complexity of such dynamic, with disclosure, objectification, and other barriers influencing their desires, sexuality, and emotional health. Many other groups might face complex barriers navigating such realms. Access to certain privileging resources and spaces translate into more chances of successfully experimenting and building towards self-knowledge of one's desires and more legitimisation in public and private arenas [17] (p. 55) and should be equal in access and representation to everyone.

Another intersectional layer in this debate is how the figure of the mother/woman is represented in the gay community. Womanhood inhabits polarised places in the abled-bodied gay community, between expectations abnegation and promptness [37], as well as reinforcing ideas of womanhood and the exalted figure of the "diva" [38]. This complicated space is constitutive of the gay culture, influencing restrictive performances of womanhood, notions of gender, heteronormativity, and social perceptions of LGBTQI+ issues. As the figure of the mother and female family member is still attributed to dynamics of care for people with disabilities, these two dynamics are conflictive and inform different expectations of femininity/masculinity in both groups. In [3], abled-bodiedness is connected to cultural ideas of development and maturity, with disability still attached to concepts of dependency, vulnerability and infancy. In gay relationships, this dichotomisations between top/bottom, empowerment/dependency, proactiveness/passivity, etc., furthers the divide in the possibilities and sexual-emotional maturation between abled-bodied gays and gays with disabilities. This absence of representation and archival availability affects ideas of masculinity and identity, where normative archetypes of masculinity and sexuality can push non-monolithic ones towards marginality. Although race, gender, and class (among other markers) are also issues affecting abled-bodied people in such apps and dating spaces, disability itself connects dynamically to these and there is much we still have much to know about how intersectionality and disability interact.

Not only the availability of spaces to explore sexuality beyond abled-bodiedness limited, but existing ones are at risk of being co-opted. Another characteristic of this mechanism is how the lack of otherness in the encounter between abled-bodied men and men with disabilities can be unfairly attributed to people with disabilities themselves. Abled-bodied people might argue they just "have

not been educated” about disability issues or intimacy with people with disabilities. Or appealing to the classic argument in the gay community that someone “is just not my type”, hiding structural prejudice in our daily politics of desire through the simplified aesthetic of “choice” [39]. This entitlement towards otherness can also be seen in other encounters crossed by gender, race and more.

4. Discussion

As McRuer [4] states, ableism operates its own framework when dealing with diversity, turning empathy into an idealised attempt [41] based on our own abled-bodied embodiment, falling far from the real possibility of reaching alterity in equal terms. In otherising abled-bodiedness, we attempt to name and discuss ableist mechanisms and its invention, highlight its artificiality and possibility of reinvention. Wagner [18] tells us that inventions are at the heart of every community, disguising their own creation to be accepted. They are in constant renewal and negotiation among groups of different power, position, and privileges. Unfortunately, the power and privilege held by abled-bodied systems is unequal in our society. Its invention serves to maintain the marginal status of disability as the “other” side, the marginalised aspect of embodiment and archival production.

In this paper, I attempted to “otherise” abled-bodiedness instead, exposing its mechanisms of maintenance and power, critiquing its asymmetric relationships by exposing and exploring its a-historicity and daily maintenance. For Deleuze and Guatarri [43], ideas that are perceived as natural and a-critical will likely feed into social structures of inequality and perpetuate micro-fascisms, such as daily ableism. I sought here to expose, name, and discuss the perpetuation of abled-bodiedness through dynamics of love, sexuality and power. It is an experiment in otherising hegemonic perspectives and an intellectual exercise in shifting dynamics of power to better understand ableism and its damaging impact in society..

5. Summarised Mechanisms and Final Considerations

This paper discussed connections between ableism and intimacy, identifying and exposing privileging abled-bodied mechanisms, summarised below:

- Selective positioning: A neutral or socially positive way of enacting empathy towards people with disability, influenced by abled-bodiedness as a “privileging” unscrutinised embodiment. It can be conscious or not, often patronising or disguised as charitable, a result of power asymmetries. In relationships, it might prevent equitable exercises in otherness. It can occur through unawareness and lack of reflectiveness of how ableism impacts people with disabilities, their notion of self and how a relationship breakdown can be influenced by unequal dynamics of gender, race, disability and more. It can protect abled-bodied people from the responsibility to learn and progress in matters of disability and equality. The lack of public and policy enforcement on matters of disability and equality can protect abled-bodied individuals from accountability, as well as conscious and unconscious ableist biases.
- Vulnerability/invisibility: A mechanism of abled-bodiedness that protects from certain social situations and social screening. Disclosure is also a privileging part of this mechanism, as more resources are available for abled-bodied people to disclose and expose their characteristics and vulnerability, socially or affective. As a comparison, wheelchair users and people with visible disabilities are socially screened and identified, with their vulnerabilities being inferred from visual and biases social identification. From an abled-bodied perspective (and some invisible disabilities), such social screening can be less of a concern to a certain extent, depending on the specificity of the social situation at hand.
- Caring and gender: The socio-historic development of gender and politics of care composes this third mechanism. It organises ideas and performances around gender through the idea of

care and wellbeing. Firstly, being “cared for” is still connected to ideas of passivity and femininity, conflicting with notions of masculinity and sense of self. In the gay community, it might echo the dynamics and roles of top/penetrator vs. the bottom/receiver, deepening associations between gender, femininity, passivity, and dependence. The array of resources and possibility for expressing one’s gender and politics of care is less negative and with more resources available for abled-bodied people. The social imagery of an abled-bodied person alongside a person with disabilities triggers images of a “carer” vs. a “cared” for, even if the relationship is based on equality, the passivity will be socially deduced from the person with visible disabilities. Much like the second mechanism, this imagery can reinforce the positive view of an abled-bodied person as an altruistic carer. Fernández, Bosch and Samaranch [40] calls our attention to the need for new theories and critical practices in and around queer communities, for instance, when thinking affection, care and assistance, claiming we still have unanswered questions and unformulated queries to help us build a respectful, yet pleasurable, politics of care and affection when it comes to the materiality of non-normative bodies. This is a challenge not only presented in this writing but also to me, as a queer academic person, and a way to invite myself and the reader to think such practices.

- Affective responsibility: This mechanism relates to abled-bodiedness and LGBTQI+ dynamics in dating. Much like with visibility and public scrutiny, it is formed by projections of societal influence and politics of desire, conscious or not, around manhood, beauty, erogenicity and sexuality. Affective responsibility is a debate over morality and how responsible we should be when engaging with other people in affective, romantic and/or sexual relationships. It verses on understanding consensus, power, and desire. This, of course, can weigh on each of the parts in a relationship, based on their privileges and barriers. These and many other variables are historically influenced, with certain groups having resources to develop their skillsets. Abled-bodiedness might be a bridge to access these resources, such as representations of love, romance, possibilities of partnerships through many media, like books, movies, and even pornography, where abled-bodied people are less fetishised in their embodied representations than people with disabilities might be.
- Intersectional aspect of intimacy: Representations of abled-bodiedness in erotic, romantic and social scenarios are more available and accessible than other neuro-embodied diversities. This mechanism privileges expressions of abled-bodiedness and its accessibility, allowing for more spontaneity and experimentality, sexually and emotionally, for abled-bodied people. It facilitates physical access to spaces for such encounters (cruising grounds, cottaging areas, etc. due to their lack of accessibility for people with disabilities) and subjective resources of representation. It can also reinforce bias towards our desires for abled-bodied people, consciously or not, leading to arguments such “It’s just not my type / not my preference”) or fetishising otherness (“I’ve never been with a disabled person before”), as an accepted ableist practice. Representation, diversity and experimentality, in this sense, can be a positive and fruitful aspect of abled-bodiedness and intimacy, but less so for people with disabilities. Representations of abled-bodiedness and disability are idealisations [40] that embody socio-historical signifiers influencing and influenced by our background, desires and socio-economic possibilities:

“It is equally imperative that we learn to idealize outside the corporeal parameters of the self. To do so would be to escape from the vicious circle which leads inexorably from the aspiration to

perfection to the experience of corporeal fragmentation, and which makes the subject irreducibly aggressive toward anyone who seems capable of approximating what he or she cannot." (37)

To escape this vicious circle of unrealistic expectations and fragmented identities, we need better structural equality and representation, destroying hierarchies of desire, subjectivity, and embodiment (Fichten & Robillard, 1983). Being free to imagine all possible combinations and have free access to equal resources in doing so, as well as producing archives for upcoming generations. As it stands, the myth of romantic openness still operates under abled-bodied narratives, unreachable to "fragmented" bodies Silverman talks about - the ones not considered complete/abled by society. These narratives are enforced and maintained through the atemporal presumption of ableism, seen not as a construction (and hence, possible of deconstruction) but as a natural and inevitable aspect of life. For otherness to be an exercise in equality, our notion of the self, as abled-bodied people, needs to be recognised as just one of the many equally important constructions in the spectrum of cultural development and transformation in time [42].

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