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Precision Ableism: A *Studies in Ableism* Approach to Developing Histories of Disability and Abledment

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Fiona Kumari Campbell undertakes research in Studies in Ableism, coloniality, disability studies as well as explorations about Buddhist formations of disability. Trained in sociology, theology and legal studies; she is interested in ways that law, new technologies and the governance of marginal populations produces understandings of the productive citizen, normative bodies, ideas of periphery and ways that ablement privileges and entitles certain groups in society. Campbell is the author of *Contours of Ableism: The Production of Disability and Abledness*, (Palgrave, 2009) and numerous other journal articles and book chapters.

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Precision Ableism: A Studies in Ableism Approach to Developing Histories of Disability and Abledment Rethinking History

Dear Dr Campbell,

I am pleased to tell you that your work has now been accepted for publication in Rethinking History.

It was accepted on Mar 14, 2019

Thank you for submitting your work to this journal.

With kind regards

Patrick Finney
Co-Editor
Rethinking History

Precision Ableism: A Studies in Ableism Approach to Developing Histories of Disability and Abledment

This paper discusses the historical project and idea of comparison, then moves onto a discussion of the role of thinking theoretically in terms of process and not object relations, a shift from a focus on binaries to aporias. The paper outlines the development of Studies in Ableism (SiA) as well as presuppositional foundations of systems of ableism, and the delimitation of abledment and disablement.

Finally, the paper contributes to thinking about the meaning of ableism in a more precise way.

Keywords: ableism, abledment, ability, disability, disability studies, historiographic epistemology, comparative research, disability history

Contexts to thinking about Ableism, Ability and Disability

Since writing about ableism in 2001 (Campbell 2001) there has been a flurry of research claiming to use ableism as an operational concept. We have witnessed a plethora of usage on Facebook and Twitter that characterises ‘ableism’ as a discriminatory slight without any sense of its properties and parameters. Some researchers still believe you can conduct research not underpinned by any form of conceptualisation. Yet, research activity is already buttressed by theorisation, much of which conflates a history of disability with that of *catastrophe*; these theorisations may be veiled, invisible or unarticulated. Our task as disability and abledment scholars is to unveil foundational presuppositions to ferment critique for building a robust intellectual enquiry. It is necessary to unimagine, and disinherit the canon of pervasive binary thinking of disability/ability which must be thought of as a problem and instead think about borders and passages, placed as *aporias*, where ‘there can be no barrier that

protects itself or separates itself from something else' (Abeysekara 2001, 24). This is particularly urgent for historical research in its treatment of social ordering around citizenship, and productive embodiment as well as the diminution of relations of societal power.

Nearly all disability studies research and recent works on *ability* have a predilection towards the *comparative* even if this aspect is not acknowledged. The research narrative or analysis moves within a binary comparative relationship of disability and its constitutive outside, ability. The comparison is so fundamental, that thinking without comparison is almost unthinkable. What does making comparisons involve? This is more complex and nuanced. However, the academic treatment of these significant aspects is uneven as there are in many pieces of research a manifest lack of precision about the remit of the so-called 'object' or subject' under study - ontologically and conceptually. There is the dangerous practice of evaluating circumstances according to some assumed agreements on that which has gone before us. Presentism, that is adopting contemporary formulations for retrospective enquiry, imposes hegemonic ideas of normativity within given cultural and soteriological contexts; all of which results in very sloppy research having potentially very distortive consequences.

As Butnor and Mc Weeny put it

The point of feminist comparative travel is not to discover new concepts, ideas, and problems that we can fit into our own frames of reference or worlds of sense, but to shift our frames altogether so that we see things differently from another perspective, a unique angle, and the standpoint of a new location. (Butnor and McWeeny 2014, 11).

The turn to the study of ablement¹ and the idea of ableism provides a new intellectual

and exegetical playground, to map discourses of nationhood, citizenship and ethical norms within a specific period; place buttressed by configurations of the normative (endowed, extolled) and non-normative (those potentially disposable remnant ‘failed’ bodies). *Abledment histories* analyse, critique or dissolve processes employed by civilisations and nation/city – states to procure ablement for peoples within their remit and conversely to engage in processes of delineation and demarcating abjection and inessentiality within trajectories of ‘race’, origin, caste, sex and (dis)ablement. The idea of ‘ability’ in research needs to be apprehended alongside its *constitutive outside* including those grey zones of uncertain populations that resist enumeration and contradiction. This paper draws upon a diverse range of theoretical approaches especially traditions from the global South particularly the Indian sub-continent. I extend and reappraise the theoretical scoping developed in my major work *Contours of Ableism: The Production of Disability and Abledness* (2009), around matters concerning relationality. In this paper I first discuss the historical project and idea of comparison, then I move onto a discussion of the role of thinking theoretically in terms of process and not object relations. Third, I outline my thinking to date on the presuppositional foundations of systems of ableism, abledment and disablement. Finally, I discuss ablement in histories using the approaches outlined in this paper.

Comparisons of what?

The *ghost of comparison* is present in studies of disablement and abledment, hence there is a necessity to *surface its presence*, by revisiting the matter of what does making comparisons involve? At its most basic, comparison is an approach often seen as a method of the explicit *contrasting of two or more cases* to explore *parallels*,

juxtapositions and differences. Research has shown that the way we read *differences* is underpinned by specific formulations about the world that are stabilised in a particular moment, event or indeed period, e.g. the nature of the self, concepts of equality, gender roles (Young 1997). Frequently, these cases are compared to a specific phenomenon, like state formation processes, particular policies or projects of participation in civil society. More often than not, the main goal is to arrive at a *typology* based on the observed differences and similarities among cases. What does the comparative project do with exceptions, contradictions, or simultaneous variability?

Historical comparisons are mostly *synchronic* (at a specific point in time) but sometimes *diachronic* (more broad ranging), comparing events, processes and structures in different periods. It pays to be wary of any decontextualised research where *der sitz im leben* is not considered, particularly in circumstances of societal volatility and uncertainty. As a sociologist I look to identify which groups are the hegemonic narrators of national or local narratives and whether there are slippages or contestations around prevailing discourses. In general, however, comparisons are typically international but sometimes are also national as well as regional. The cultural model of disability as epitomised in the Preamble of the *UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities* states,

... disability is an *evolving concept* and that disability *results from the interaction* between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others. (*Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, 6 December 2006, at [e], my emphasis).

By no means perfect in its assumption of some agreement about what might constitute

apriori ‘impairments’ and the delimitation of equality, the *Preamble* nonetheless in its *relational dynamic* of porous disability boundaries can work for unpacking the textures of abledment and its outside remnants (this could be disability, slaves, the banished and displaced). We will see this *process-orientation* being picked up in the exposition of processes and practices of ableism later in this paper, suffice to say at this time; ‘disability’ and ‘ability’ are very much ‘moving targets’, being interpenetrated and responsively evolving in dependence upon emergent other conditions, such as the location of the event, the meaning given to the event, its timing, whether national vulnerabilities are perceived by rulers to be under attack. Other exchange relations might come into play, e.g. social roles, labour and sexual dynamics. We need to ask ourselves in our research reflexively, ‘why what is being compared with what, in what respect and with what aim?’

It is axiomatic that a *choice is being made* each time a researcher sets out to do comparative research – and it is usually not difficult at all to find out what choice has been made in a given scholarly piece, such as a decision to bracket off the poor from the infirm, or soldiers from combatants and civilians. In disability research choices are often not acknowledged and we see *fabrications* of disability/ability where there are attempts to screen in and out certain populations; a biopolitical strategy, to suit a research design conforming to a funder agreement or the general ethos of the day as to how populations are stylised and rendered. As Rada Iveković (2000, 227) argues

The very act of comparison is not a neutral operation. Neutral comparison does not exist. It is forced to draw on a terminology and an intellectual [occidental] context ... [which] reveal[s] how difficult it is to juxtapose, let alone compare, two worlds and two traditions.

Indeed, occidental discourses about the orient are infused with ableist inferences that posit certain civilisations to be developmentally arrested or backward. Assumptively, common-sense concepts such as individualism are culturally loaded. Comparative studies, simply by virtue of being ‘comparative’, in one way or another involves a series of aspects, which may be *analytically distinguished* in just any comparison.

Under a dynamic view of comparison, a point of commonality sustains the comparison in the sense of providing a rationale as to why one *comparatum* is put next to the other. For the comparison may change, be entirely substituted, or provisionally amount to no more than a *property of merely being of interest* to the comparer. Such interest requires declaration or exposure employing a refined hermeneutical awareness of a researcher’s own dispositions about subjectivity (Butnor and McWeeny 2014). In short, the variables involved are the comparer, the *comparata* and the pre-comparative-assumptive *tertium*, the *tertium comparationis*, and the consequences of the comparison. Our research does not undertake comparisons in isolation, but is motivated by some specific reason(s) and pursued to reach some goal(s) that may well point beyond the ‘comparison itself’ to questions of ideology, personal or collective identity, institutional pressures, political or other national agendas around population fitness and dispensability, continuations of earlier dialogues about civilization and progress, and so on. *Interest* might be the notion of the citizen under communism (Offermann, this issue), or the rendering of the caloric body in terms of fit/ness (Mackert, this issue; Martschukat, this issue).

Regarding global civilisational dialogue, Rada Iveković (2000) points to the impossibility of symmetries between east and west, and the strangeness of considering

the occident (the west) as the image of the Other for the global south.² As Iveković (2000, 225) concludes ‘[t]he Orient has never been able and will never be able to respond to any of our questions about it because, for the Orient, they are poor questions and false problems. They arise from a context which excludes this very dialogue, just as it demands the responses it “expects.”’ We can borrow and reflect upon Iveković’s insight as it pertains to ableist relations; substituting the signifier ‘The Orient’ with ‘The disabled’ who in our own way are subaltern, existing in very defined, vexed and precarious cultural spaces and realities. Equally significant, Iveković’s probing of those poor questions and false problems goes to the heart of how the self or subjectivity has been understood and how that formation is misrecognised or conflated in non-liberal or non-western societies. What does citizenship under socialism, a realm of the collective whereby various forms of family-kin relations predominate, mean for the iteration of abledment? (Offermann, this issue) or in Confucian cultures where harmony is prized over individual autonomy wherein ‘justice’ is understood as appropriate humanness (Murphy and Weber 2016)?

Challenges to Thinking Theoretically: From Object to Process

We are perhaps familiar with biomedicalism (an orthodox approach to disablement) and the contemporary concept of the social model of disability which links the designation ‘disability’ to capitalist economy and social organisation. Both models of disability operate along the lines of a *linear unidirectional causal paradigm* where there is a proximity linkage between exact *causes* and extant *effects*. The rehabilitation model, architectural design, the economy or the adoption of prognosis diagnostics is indicative of paradigms that proposes that ‘similar causes yield similar effects, and that different

effects derive from difference causes' (Macy 1991, 9). An exemplar of this manifestation is the rise of actuarialism and nosologies of disease.

What is going on here? *Linear unidirectional causal* paradigms are predicated on what Santos (2014) refers to as *abyssal thinking* where there are visible and invisible distinctions - distinctions based on *dualist* differentiations with the invisible element or signifier acting as the foundation of the visible category. Later on, I will discuss this *abyssal line* with reference to ableist relations that are premised of the idea of a constitutional divide. For now, we can say that that this *abyssal line*, this *constitutional division* as a form of objectification is savagely policed within modernity with its obsession with extreme precision and the fetish of categorisation. The drive towards precision finds expression in fundamentalist positivism which separates epistemology from ontology and subject-object relations.

Linear unidirectional causal paradigms are attractive for the government of populations in its insistence on *categorical* thinking which is deemed to be stable, changing only inasmuch as knowledge is refined and often this mode of knowledge formation is reduced to a theory of *comparisons* based on pre-set *binary* modalities. This becomes an obdurate problem for researchers, in that comparisons rely on some declared common denominators or absolutes which have not necessarily been acknowledged or agreed upon by stakeholders especially those whom are subjected to categorisation or living in *anomalous zones* (enclaves, ghettos, camps or incarceration facilities). Building on Rada Iveković (2000) it may be more fruitful as critical researchers instead of looking at ontologised demarcations of comparisons between humans and non-human actants to instead work with variables and processes that *contrast*, i.e. ideas of endowment or enhancement, deficiency.

So, the task then, is not to deliberate in terms of ‘this or that’ or ‘either/or’ but to *deontologise* ontology which enables thinking in terms of ‘and’ plus ‘and’. Abyssal thinking not only makes us contemplate, it launches our thinking in terms of *evaluatively ranked comparisons* that are caught up in an endless cycle of return to duality, which whilst producing excess inevitably generate and reproduce ‘wrong’ or misdirected research preoccupations and questions. Poor epistemology even if posturing as strong questions inevitably produces poor answers. As Santos puts it there ‘[is] a lack of credible and prudent knowledge capable of securing for us all ... a decent life’ (2014, 106). The litmus test of any social theory of difference (in our case disability and abledness) is that a theory’s explanatory framework needs to be able to incorporate absent and suppressed knowledges. Investing in the ‘fiction’ that Europe experienced a period known as the Great Confinement for instance, detracts from a recognition producing erasure of the many forms of family and community-based care for mentally ill people during that period (Bartlett and Wright 1999). Knowledge formations need to be aggregated with the solidarity they create, wherein knowledge practices attend to social practices. Drawing again from Santos who appends cognitive justice to social justice, he beckons us to make a civilisational choice:

The idea of cognitive justice points to a radical demand for social justice, a demand that includes unthinking the dominant criteria by which we define social justice and fight against social injustice. It implies, therefore, going to the roots of such criteria to question not only their socio-political determinations but also their cultural, epistemological, and even ontological presuppositions (Santos 2014, 237).

I believe that disability studies to a certain extent has reached a point of *conceptual exhaustion* particularly as it relates to the social model of disability (UK) and

identitarian politics (USA) exposing the limits of neo-liberal parameters of tolerance that display ambivalence and reversals. In reflecting ideas generated over the years I have become aware of some of the seductions and pitfalls in abyssal thinking that have created confusions between the layers of ableism's building blocks (foundations) and the entry points into ableist practices and processes. Maybe due to the saturation of binarisms within hegemonic Western intellectual traditions, I realised that there were still some missing pieces of the theoretical landscaping that needed to be attended to, for example, being more precise in denotations and connections. We need to acknowledge the depth of abyssal thinking and the efforts required to overthrow sovereign knowledges, the *epistemicide* of these thinking systems whereby the trope of burden endures and literally kills us! Although it was already in front of me, the conceptual elephant in the room – present but not seen – was exposed almost by accident. When reviewing some Buddhist concepts, I revisited the concept of *papañca* which denotes *conflicted/proliferating thought* and so one of the missing pieces in rendering ableist landscapes emerged.

Papañca (conflicted thinking) objectifies the self and reifies binary categories implicit in the activity of comparison undertaken by many western scholars. The Buddha insists that *papañca* is instead a source of conflict and pain (*Majjhima Nikaya* 18; *Digha Nikaya* 21) as the categories and perceptions arising out of *papañca* are what cause conflict (*Majjhima Nikaya* 18; *Digha Nikaya* 22). *Papañca* occurs when a person's thinking takes *them*, the thinker, as its *object*. Emblematic of the approach is the idea of *possessive individualism* dominant since the time of René Descartes (1596 – 1650), here in C.B. Macpherson's { ADDIN ENRfu } words:

The individual [...] is free in as much as he [sic] is proprietor of his person and capacities. *The human essence* is freedom from dependence *on the will of others, and freedom is a function of possession* ... Society consists of relations of exchange *between proprietors* (emphasis added).

This move towards objectification produces binary categories such as self/not-self, existence/non-existence, here/there—from the ontological signifier, ‘I am’. The fact that the issues surrounding this mental label can multiply so quickly and spread so far gives some credence to the idea that *papañca* is proliferation. Alternative Buddhist understandings of existence converge within these ableist processes. Thinking through a prism of *papañca* means we apprehend ourselves and the world in which we live, in terms of *objects* rather than an alternative *dependant - originated* view, where *events* and *processes* constantly shift and are unstable. An ableist system of relations for those designated according to the illusionary matrixes of ‘disabled’ or ‘abled’ produces *ambivalence*. The *Tanah Sutta* captures this sense of cateristic proliferation well in the *Eighteen (18) ‘craving verbalisations’*. In terms of this illusive ‘*interior*’ thinking, the thinker conjures:

There being ‘I am’, there comes to be ‘I am here’, there comes to be ‘I am like this’ ... ‘I am otherwise’ ... ‘I am bad’ ... ‘I am good’ ... ‘I might be’ ... ‘I might be here’ ... ‘I might be like this’ ... ‘I might be otherwise’ ... ‘May I be here’ ... ‘May I be like this’ ... ‘May I be otherwise’ ... ‘I will be’ ... ‘I will be here’ ... ‘I will be like this’ ... ‘I will be otherwise’. (*Anguttara Nikaya*, 4: 199).

And *papañca* in the context of externalised being, these craving-verbalisations proliferate in the pursuit of normative shadows (c.f. Overboe 2007) through such thoughts as

There being ‘I am because of this (or: by means of this)’, there comes to be ‘I am here because of this’, there comes to be ‘I am like this because of this’ ... ‘I am otherwise because of this’ ... ‘I am bad because of this’ ... ‘I am good because of this’ ... ‘I might be because of this’ ... ‘I might be here because of this’ ... ‘I might be like this because of this’ ... ‘I might be otherwise because of this’ ...
(*Anguttara Nikaya*, 4: 199).

As we can see, the source of misapprehension, derived from a *wrong conception of the self*, induces the ‘emotion of conceit, vanity, inferiority feelings, certain forms of depression, desolation and such ego-related emotions.’ (De Silva 1992, 98.) Craving (*taṇhā*) for, and attachment (*ragā*) to, ‘ability’ due to ignorance (*Avijjā*) contributes to the formation of internalised ableism (Campbell 2009), an *eternal insufficiency*, or *bhava-taṇhā*, wherein we believe that ‘[t]here is something wrong with me and I have got to make it right. I have got to become something else by getting rid of these bad things, these wrong things about me’ (Sumedho 2014, 149). Again, the testing of the operation of those concepts against the lived experience of disabled people and people aspiring to be ‘abled’ is required especially in instances where ableist norms suggest there is a falling short of an articulated standard.

‘Able’, ‘Disabled’ is not a thing, a noun or indeed an adjective. To hold this belief is to engage in conflicted proliferating thinking that takes the subjectivity of ‘I’ as its object, starting and return point. To pursue the endless question of who is deemed ‘disabled’ and ‘abled’ becomes redundant. Instead there is a need for both signifiers to be understood as a *practice*, as a *process* which is an aporia. An aporia is a double-edged problem which cannot be solved because it pre-exists in the first place. The question of *differentiation* is proposed in such a fashion, on terms where there can be no conclusive solution, except the infinite reiteration of the question itself which endlessly

proliferates according to the conditions of its temporality and space. This is why questions of the demarcation of ‘disabled’ and ‘abled’ are futile. Ableist aporias disrupt and become a problem for those preoccupied with universalisms. The aporias of ableist processes should be central to our thinking about difference in historical enquiry and in a history of the present. A focus on ableism in terms of processes and as a practice prompts new preoccupations and questions such as: how do/did ‘*We-I*’³, come to *be* in this moment? And what are the conditions of a signifying practices emergence? This reorientation will be outlined and explored in the next sections.

What is Ableism?

Ableism is deeply seeded at the level of epistemological systems of life, personhood, power and liveability. Ableism is not just a matter of ignorance or negative attitudes towards disabled people; it is a trajectory of perfection, a deep way of thinking about bodies, wholeness, permeability and how certain clusters of people are *en-abled* via valued entitlements. Bluntly ableism functions to ‘inaugurat[e] the norm’ (Campbell 2009, 5). As such integrating Studies in Ableism (SiA) into social and historical research represents a significant challenge to practice as ableism moves beyond the more familiar territory of disability, social inclusion, and usual indices of exclusion to the very divisions of life. Abledment and the corresponding notion of ableism are intertwined. Although ableist relations purport to operate out of a binary modality, this interpenetration is more complex and multi-faceted than mere binary relations would imply. A symptom and outcome of ableist processes, *compulsory abledment* compels the inauguration of a dynamic promise that suggests ablement is in reach for all.

In terms of pedigree, May 1981 appears to be ableism's Groundhog Day, with the signifier first used to delineate negative stereotypes towards disabled people in a themed 'women with disabilities' issue of the journal *Off Our Backs* (11.5). These disabled women activists in the US sketched their experiences of border limits and aporias championing ableism as the source of social exclusion and the proclivities of intersectionality and entitlement (Aldrich 1981; House 1981; Rae 1981). In the following decade, work referring to ableism emerged within the fields of black and feminist studies. From around 1998, the concept of ableism remained underdeveloped within disability studies research. A first definitional attempt by Rauscher and McClintock (1997) postulated ableism as a system of discrimination and exclusion. What was missing were any nuances about processes and predilections of such 'systems'. In 2001 I provided a crude attempt to locate ableism as an epistemology: '... A network of beliefs, processes and practices that produces a particular kind of self and body (the corporeal standard) that is projected as the perfect, species typical and therefore essential and fully human. Disability then is cast as a diminished state of being human' (Campbell 2001, 44).

Despite pointing to the conundrum of ableism's '...limited definitional or conceptual specificity' (Campbell 2009, 5) in disability research, this challenge has not been fully addressed and *concept stabilisation* has not been achieved. The utility of ableism to interrogate new sites of subordination has however occurred in management studies; counselling, law, racism, immigration studies and political theory. In attempting to develop conceptual clarity and work on developing SiA as a research methodology, I 'revised' the definition of ableism, as a

... system of causal relations about the order of life that produces processes and systems of entitlement and exclusion. This causality fosters conditions of microaggression, internalized ableism and, in their jostling, notions of (un)encumbrance. A system of dividing practices, ableism institutes the reification and classification of populations. Ableist systems involve the *differentiation, ranking, negation, notification* and *prioritization* of sentient life. (Campbell 2017, 287 – 288).

The above-mentioned *five-prong elements* form a template for contemporary societal interventions as well as methodological enquiry. *Dichotomous binary thinking* I would argue, is stronger in western philosophical traditions and has less of a hold in the Indian sub-continent where there is a tendency towards acknowledging the existence of multiple, supplementing truths and elements simultaneously; which means that ableist systems are likely to have different formations. SiA is at a crossroad; slippery and imprecise delimitations and deployments of the concept has meant that analysis of implications of theorisation for praxis have become hamstrung and vexed due in the main to a lack of conceptual rigor.

As a hegemonic referential category to differentiate the ‘normal’ from the ‘dispensable’, the concept of *abledness* is predicated on some *pre-existing* notion about the normative nature of *species typical functioning* that is trans-cultural and trans-historical, yet *varies* in its presentation and processes and therefore is not necessarily universalisable.⁴ Ableism does not just stop at promulgating the ‘species typical’ which is assumed to be demarcatable, stable and self-contained. Any examination of these differentiating practices need to transcend the type of object relations differentiation which is presumed in *conflicted/proliferating thought* processes. An *ableist imaginary* tells us what a *healthy body* means – a *normal* mind, the pace and tenor of thinking and

the *kinds* of emotions and affect that are suitable to express. Of course, these ‘fictional’ characteristics of corporeality are promoted as an ideal, conditioned and contoured by time and place.

An *ableist imaginary* relies upon the existence of an unacknowledged imagined shared community of able-bodied/minded people, held together by a common ableist homosocial world view that asserts the *preferability* of the norms of ableism often asserted by way of political codes of citizenship, including nation building and the idea of the ‘productivity of the multitude’ (Hardt and Negri 2005). Such ableist trajectories erase differences in the ways humans express our emotions, use our thinking and bodies in different cultures and in different situations. Corporeal Otherness is rendered sometimes as the ‘disabled’, ‘perverted’ or ‘abnormal body’ instead of the more neutral designation ‘variable’ bodies. A critical feature of an ableist orientation is a belief that impairment or some adversely differentiated attribute is *inherently* negative and at its essence is a form of harm in need of amelioration, cure or indeed exculpation. SiA inverts traditional approaches, by shifting the gaze and concentration to what the study of disability or aberrancy tells us about the production, operation and maintenance of ableism through performances of abledment as well as the terms of theoretical engagement from *object* relations to *process* relations.

Matrices of Ableism

Dividing Elements

It is hard to pin systems of ableism down because these systems are a series of permeable practices. It is possible to argue that a characteristic of ableist systems is that

they create the illusion or fabricate a world-view that is unidirectional, reifying ‘cause’ and ‘effect’, where the uncertainties and leakiness of the body dis-appear within a teleological narrative of ‘progress’, improvement and empire building towards a pristine model of ablement, in more recent times in the style of the feigned posthuman.

The formation of an ableist epistemology occurs on the basis of relationships shaped by *fictionalised* binaries that are mutually constitutive. For example, it is not possible to have a fully inclusive notion of ‘health’ or corporeal optimisation without a carefully contained understanding of not-health/ diminishment (we call this disability or sometimes chronic illness and refigure health as harmony). Central to a system of ableism are two elements, namely the *notion of the normative* (and normal individual, e.g. the prized body/mind/aesthetic) and the *enforcement of a divide* between a so-called perfected or developed humanity (how humans are supposedly meant to be) and the aberrant, the unthinkable, underdeveloped and therefore not really-human. These dividing practices re-invent themselves but circulate as divides of naturalism. The ableist divide can also capture asymmetrical relations based on differences of sex, origin, caste, race, and animality which in different ways, in epistemology and social practices has been constituted as sites of inferiority or disability.

Element 1: What Normal? Ableist ‘logic’ tells us being able-bodied is always relational to that which is considered its opposite, whereas disability involves assigning labels to bodies and mentalities outside of the norm. Hence relations of ableism are based on an ontology of *negation* or absence but still are situated within an ontological paradigm. As a practice, ableism at least in the west, demands an unbridled form of individualism that is pre-occupied with continuous self-improvement and corporeal enhancement (fit, benchmarked and upgradeable bodies) that struggles with the reality

of illness, disability and contingency. Ableism is married to a sense of permanency, a sense of the unity of the idealised, stabilised, assessed and ranked human form. With the development of enhancement technologies (cosmetic neurology and surgery for instance) the notion of the norm is constantly sliding, maybe creating a larger pool of 'abnormal' persons who because of 'choice' or limited resources cannot 'improve' themselves and hence lapse into deficiency.

Element 2: The second feature is a *constitutional divide* between the normal and anomalous at the 'levels of ontology, materiality and sentiency' (Campbell 2009, 7). We may suspect the existence of these fictional divisions, even if we have not had a name for it, or find the language of constitutions a bit bristly. Constitutions are related to the structure or attributes of an entity which shapes a characterisation. Constitutions are concerned with jurisdiction and boundaries between persons, things and actions and the ways that each of these elements assemble and interpenetrate (Mussawir 2011). Constitutionality orders the terms of relations and is linked to cosmography. . Constitutions reject hybrid or grey zones and the interactions of marginal multiplicity which are sometimes expelled to the peripheries. Mixtures in history make civic comparisons messy and undecidable. The existence and complexity of hybrid peoples within certain historical periods often go unnoticed or get 'put on notice' by being marked out in legal actuarialism.

Divisions of constitutionality require people to identify with a category – 'are you disabled or not?' 'Oh, no I am not disabled, I am ill!' or 'I am able-bodied.' For the ease of conversation, we often feel the need to minimise any confusion. The carrying of an *Enumerative* or *Diagnostic Passport* is blatant propaganda that supports the argument developed by sociologist Bruno Latour (1993, 10 - 11) who states '...these

two independent practices [of normalising and pathologising] ... must remain distinct in order for them to work/function.’ If the definitions of abled-bodied and disabled become unclear or slippery the business of legal and governmental administration would have problems functioning. A division is achieved by way of tactics of *purification* and *translation*.

Purification: Social differentiation produces assumed difference: the abled and disabled which in turn are outcomes of our ways of looking and sensing. Differentiation is not merely comparative ‘but rather co-relationally constitutive’ (Campbell 2009, 6). Already embedded within these divisions are ‘fundamental bio-political fracture[s]. [In other words] ... what cannot be included in the whole of which it is a part ... what cannot belong to the whole in which it is always already included’ (Agamben 2000, 31.12). Clarification of this perceived ‘uncertainty’ is achieved through a tactic called *Purification*, the marking of distinct archetypes. Ableism assists in the government of disability ensuring that populations that appear dis-ordered (maybe even causing social disorder) become ordered, mapped and distinct. *Purification* is essential to be able to count populations even if this counting and classifying does not reflect and in fact distorts reality, in any event demeanours and lives are judged according to constitutional arrangements (Mussawir 2011).

Translation – from Mixtures to Singularity: Turning to the realm of tacit knowledge gained from social relations, the second tactic in enforcing a constitutional divide is *Translation*. Let’s take a look at this. No human is self-contained, and our lives are constantly changing and (trans)formed through the contexts in which we move. Humans are endowed by their relations with technologies (cars, vaccines, clothing, implements, clocks, light bulbs to extend the workday, communications

devices, prosthesis and drugs etc.). Relations between human and non-human entities (actors) are already hybridised and made up of changeable aspects neither are they obvious or self-contained. Our relationship to context (people, environments, place and cyberspace, mental and bodily changes) means that human typologies are endless, shifting and that's without factoring in a belief in multi-life narratives (as in Indo-societies). The character of ability can change through interfaces with behaviour modifying drugs and the use of apparatus (speech, memory, virtual reality, hearing and mobility enhancement). Most of us rarely fit into the definitive classifications of *Purification* – yet such confusion or ‘grey zones’ of daily life are neaten up through *translation* into zones of distinction ~ he is ‘this’ and she is ‘that’. Enshrined in ableism is a metaphysical system which feeds into an ethos of ablement and the erasure of variability, permeability and changeability.

Interventions: A relational understanding of ableist formations

A relational understanding of ableist formations is built around adapting and merging General Systems Theory (GST) and the Buddhist doctrine of *Paṭiccasamuppāda* (Dependant Origination). System literally means ... patterning, ‘*synhistanai*’ (from the Greek), ‘to place together’. Systems are enclosed or are enclosed by other systems (Laszlo 1972; McMahon 2008) as all elements are part of a vast network of being. Ervin Laszlo (1972) has developed the concept of *interdetermination* to express the elusiveness and changeability of life systems. A SiA critique of ableist relations rejects the idea of a static, identifiable ‘enemy’ as this kind of theorisation needs to have a person/group that is objectified and suggests the necessity to shift to studying processes and practices. This approach works well within critical historical research. Instead of

deconstructing the conundrum of binaries, *interdetermination* bypasses these problems.

Accordingly, the universe, a relational frame, is described as ‘an interdetermined network of mutually qualifying causes and effects’ (Laszlo 1972, 246), where each causal action is reciprocally transmogrified by the effect it produces. Interdetermination is a useful binder in the study of ableist relations and can assist in the plotting of often elusive relations of perfection, uncertainty and aberration. Supplementing Latour’s (1993) refusal of the nature/culture division through his study of the work of purification, Laszlo argues for the abolition of the subject-object distinction as a frame for some hermeneutics of experience, as ‘experience’ itself as a non-essentialist referent is shifting, changing, moving: ‘[experience is] ... a continuous chain of events, from which we cannot, without arbitrariness, abstract an entity called “organism” and another called “environment”’ (Laszlo 1972,63).

Likewise, in Buddhism, *aniccha* (impermanence) naturalises the manifestations of impermanence including all variable bodies which are subject to change and leakiness. Adoption of *aniccha* to SiA enables an epistemological shift of the positioning of impairment from abnormality to reality – where we all are born, change, experience illness, become ‘aged’ and die (Nānananda 2004). This perspective may not seem foreign to particular moments in history or cultures. In Buddhism, all phenomena are dependently arisen (*paṭiccasamuppāda*). *Paṭiccasamuppāda* extolls that conditions that arise at the atomistic level and absences produce cessation. Ying Shen (2007, 171) provides a summary of mutual causality:

The belief is that everything, mental and physical, comes into being owing to certain conditions, and disappears when the conditions disappear, so nothing is independent. Reality is viewed as a dynamically interdependent process.

Everything exists in a web of mutual causal interaction, and nothing, whether mental or physical, whole or part, is immutable or fully autonomous. ... A cause can only produce an effect given the right conditions.

One of the templates that needs to be tested concerns the figuring of 'ability', the shaping of ableist practices; and the *proximity* of these practices to beliefs about relationality and impermanence. The arising and conditioning of phenomena has its own texture and conditioning and these two aspects depend upon *specific conditions*. These conditions produce specific types and relate to structures and can be a useful gauge in social research. Buddhism offers an additional field for the investigation of the conditions that induce ableist relations by way of examining the dependent condition and how it originates (*samudaya*), its source (*nidana*), processes of generation (*jatika*), how being emerges (*pabhava*), is nourished (*ahara*), how the condition acts foundationally (*upaniisa*) and induces a flow (*upayapeti*) (*Niddesa Mahaniddesa* S.XII, 11, 23, 27, 66, 69). This drilling down of *conditions* has the capacity to plot methodologically the particularised parts of aspects that may come into play in the shaping of social organisation.

These systems are animated when *conditions converge*, when matter, information and energy are exchanged that create the environment and ensure its sustainability (Macy 1991; Ying Shen 2007). An example of *conditions convergence* drawn from the UK, might be: loss of empire + Brexit +border policing+ austerity + slashes to welfare + suicides of disabled people denied welfare payments + scapegoating + homosociality (new ideas of nation, being with one's 'own kind'). A micro analysis focuses on the nature of *conditions* present producing ableist relations or inducements to abledment. It explores particularised relationships between conditions

and the ‘types’ of phenomena, unfolding *patterns* or modalities that emerge to configure bodies and subjectivities. Ableist relations of co-dependence can involve conditions whereby disability and abledness are animated in mutuality or absence/presence, forming aporias and not binary relations. Systems environments exist in a space; in this space a micro-focus can study the workings of ableist relations more closely in comparative historical research.

The concept of *paṭīccasamuppāda* is quite specific in that the shaping of conditionality arising corresponds with *specific conditions* or typologies. As Macy remarks ‘... there is no immutable essence other than that definitive of process itself; no realm or entity stands over against the process of change. All is in motion, all is subject to ceaseless flux and transformation, arising and passing away’ (Macy 1976, 22). We can then propose that one of these structures or patterns that emerge, can be called *ableist relations* or patterns which are also conditional and not necessarily repetitive replicas. Disrupting the round of existential suffering is possible by way of eliminating the causal force or conditions in their particular circumstance that sustain, such as through interventions to modify or introduce new conditions where there is the capacity to do so. As Bodhi explains: ‘...though the round has no first point, no cause outside itself, it does have a distinct generative structure, a set of conditions internal to itself which keeps it in motion.’ (2005, 3).

This process could well be used to foreground the rising and declining of very specific styles of ablement which texture mental-materiality. It is not the input that determines its action, but what *happens to the input* within the system. This space of happening undermines the ‘linear concept of causality ... that similar conditions produce similar results and that different conditions will produce different results.’ (Macy 1991;

93). It is vital to drill down to the space of *interactivity in translation*, the aporetic zone that foregrounds the limits of a border, the interrelationality of cause and effect to ‘investigate what this interactivity clarifies and obfuscates’ (Campbell 2009, 9). Where there is a persistence of anomalies, discontinuities and mismatches in the codes, such changes in conditions interrupt incoming precepts destabilising the sovereignty of the system codes as the principle hermeneutic.

Abledment(s) in Histories

There is a temptation to go back into history and retrieve what is absent or invisible in the historical imagination, but this project must also focus on making *present* discontinuities knowable. This task is made easier by releasing history from the clutches of time, succession and archive, to viewing history as belonging ‘to community, or to being-in-common’ (Nancy 1990, 49). Similar projects have attempted to retrieve ‘women’ hidden from history and negotiated so called ‘minority histories’. The question then arises as to the fate of recovering disabilities in history and what I would argue is even a more difficult task, that of constructing histories of ‘ability’ in any given period, given the scarcity of documentary sources or the necessity to interrogate source documents written as rhetorical devices to promote particular agendas. A genealogy of disablement and ablement presents a myriad of problems – historical, epistemological and ontological. In the historical project scholars are profoundly confronted by the elusive nature of *ablement* that resists grasping and is decidedly undecidable especially when affixed to other conditions of differentiation such as gender, beggars, ‘madness’, anomalia, caste and social class. This paper is not about constructing a fictional genealogy of a ‘fixed entity’ of the disabled person

moving unconsciously through history. Michel Foucault (1977) argues that the purpose of history, guided by genealogy, should not be the *delimitation of a coherent identity*, but a *commitment to variation*, to make visible the discontinuities of life. Indeed, some historical scholars have dispensed with the search for disability predicated on the disabled/abled divide by re-mounting their project along the lines of variability (Mounsey 2014). Whilst this approach can be commended as a way of bypassing restrictive and epistemologically suspect binarisms, the detour may veil or elide the operation of ableist relations.

Critical disability studies have drawn attention to two significant insights, firstly that the neologism ‘disability’ can be understood in terms of *catachresis*. That is, there is no literal referent for such a concept – rather as soon as the concept is discursively interrogated, its meaning loses fixity, generality and ultimately collapses. Nonetheless, a persistent association with ablement lies in its obsession with forms of virulent masculinity, performance, honour, militarism (blood rites, killing, maiming, and dominations) and notions of degeneration shape the ethos of a city-state by being harnessed and deployed as a guarantee of a ruling classes mandate. Splintered from associations with power, *strong bodies* have provided the ‘raw material’ harnessing the subjectivity of the *productive multitude* in labour, extraction, human reproduction; slaveries have made colonisation and empire possible. These associations with, and the buttressing of, abledment requires further research, identifying some patterns and discontinuities of abledment within western histories.

Conclusion

SiA is at a crossroad, slippery and imprecise delimitations and deployments of the concept have meant that analysis of implications of theorisation for praxis become hamstrung and vexed due in the main to a lack of conceptual rigor, hence there are ensuing difficulties in addressing critical questions of our time. The *utility* of SiA as a research methodology can be engaged as a tool for unveiling a politics of difference in the lives of peripheral peoples and the formation of the ‘abled person’ (abledment). In this paper I have discussed the comparative project as well as hegemonic ways of theorising, object relations starting from the position of the ‘I’ as the origin of thinking leading to conflicted /proliferating thought; instead of adopting an open-ended epistemology that recognises systems as inherently unstable, subjected to flows. I have argued that the focus of theorisation around ableism, disablement/ablement should be on processes and practices in terms of aporias, rather than attend to the irresolvable contradiction of the binary.

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- 1 In this paper I use *ablement* to express a *productive* relation, the ongoing, dynamic processes of becoming abled. Although, *ablement* is something used interchangeably with *ableism*, I prefer to use *ablement* when I wish to emphasise it's coupling with disablement. My approach contrasts with the terminology of ability/abled or able-bodied which are assumed to be static states. These states are not self-evident and require problematisation.
- 2 There is no space here to discuss notions of the captive mind or academic dependency (see Alatas 2006).
- 3 We-I, combined 'we' and 'I' in a symbiotic relation.
- 4 In other research (Campbell 2011) I suggest that there has been a movement toward uniformity of knowledge systems and coding in health and disability, what I refer to as *geodisability knowledges*. Ableism however is everywhere, but its manifestations as a practice is not the same everywhere and in every moment.