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Towards a relational geography of disability

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Towards a Relational Geography of Disability

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Abstract:	<p>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.</p>

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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

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3 materialities of the lived impaired body (French, 1993; Shakespeare and Watson, 1995). This
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5 critique was picked up and developed by geographers engaging with poststructuralism and, in
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7 particular, embodiment and performative notions of identity (Butler and Parr, 1999; Hall, 2000),
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9 in studies of chronic illness (Moss and Dyck, 1996), emotional and behavioural problems (Holt,
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11 2004) and mental ill health (Parr, 2000; 2006).
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15 Using this theoretical perspective, geographers increasingly understood social
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17 environments not as pre-determinedly exclusionary and oppressive (as conceived by Gleeson,
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19 1999) for people with impairments (though in many instances they were and continue to be so),
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21 but rather as contexts in which people engage and perform their embodiment and in so doing
22
23 re/produce and transform both themselves and their surroundings. Imrie and Edwards (2007:
24
25 626) conceptualised this as the 'recursive relationship between identity and space'. Imrie's
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27 (2004) study of accessible housing offers an example, recognising the 'importance of
28
29 embodiment in influencing people's experiences of, and meanings attributed to, home' (41),
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31 concluding that impairment does not 'acquire meaning of function independent from social
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33 context or setting' (ibid.). Both embodiment and home become what they are through the active
34
35 inter-relationship of embodied and emotional actions, intentions and desires.
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41 To a significant degree, these arguments reflect broader disciplinary developments.
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43 Murdoch (2006) and Massey (2005) argued for a relational sense of space; spaces as *made up of*
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45 relations and, as such, always being 'made, unmade, and remade by the incessant shuffling of
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47 heterogeneous relations' (Doel, 2007: 810). From this perspective, rather than separating the
48
49 'oppressive social experience of disability' from the 'limitations (and capacities) [of]
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51 impairment' (Gleeson, 1999: 52), we can imagine bodies (both impaired and non-impaired),
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3 objects and spaces engaged in shifting relations that have the capacity to produce both
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5 exclusionary and/or enabling arrangements.
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8 A similar ‘relational turn’ has emerged within critical disability studies. Building on
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10 Thomas’ (1999; 2004) notion of disability ‘as an unequal social relationship between those who
11
12 are impaired and those who are non-impaired or ‘normal’ in society’ (1999: 40), a complex,
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14 multi-scalar or ‘laminated’ (Bhaskar and Danermark, 2006: 290), social relational understanding
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16 of disability has developed (Gustavson, 2004; Watson, 2012). Shakespeare (2014) cites Williams
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18 (1999) earlier insightful summary: ‘Disability ... is an emergent property, located, temporally
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20 speaking, in terms of the interplay between the biological reality of physiological impairment,
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22 structural conditioning (i.e. enablement/constraints) and socio-cultural interaction/elaboration’
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25 (Williams, 1999: 810; in Shakespeare, 2014: 73).
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29 While there has been some recognition, then, of the importance of relational thinking for
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31 geographic scholarship on disability, our aim in this paper is to spur further discussion and
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33 debate by engaging more fully with a key stream of relational thinking in human geography, that
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35 of non-representational theory. We argue that key elements of non-representational thinking
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37 challenge existing ways of doing disability geography. These include the shift from an
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39 epistemological emphasis on meaning and identity to an ontological concern with bodies and
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41 material doings, as well as a decentering of a stable – or what Macpherson (2010) refers to as an
42
43 ‘authentic’ – disabled subject in favour of an emphasis on relational becomings. At the same
44
45 time, these challenges carry important opportunities to think differently about how *all* bodies
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47 become dis/abled in and through their everyday geographies and how such becomings might be
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49 made otherwise.
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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

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2
3 the ongoing, practical achievement of life allows for a focus on what bodies can or cannot do in
4
5 specific settings. As Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 257) contend in a well-known passage:
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8 We know nothing about a body until we know what it can do, in other words, what its
9
10 affects are, how they can or cannot enter into composition with other affects, with the
11
12 affects of another body, either to destroy that body or to be destroyed by it, either to
13
14 exchange actions and passions with it or to join with it in composing a more powerful
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17 body.
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20 As Lim (2010) suggests, asking what a body can do is to pose a ‘genuinely open’ question that
21
22 does not assume a given social or biological functionality to a particular body, but is concerned
23
24 instead with how a body’s capacity emerges from a specific and shifting field of potential. This
25
26 field of potential is ‘virtual’ in the sense that it contains all of the ways in which the bodies
27
28 involved might affect one another, and from which one event or outcome becomes actual.
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32 A second key element of NRT has been its focus on the ways in which the relational
33
34 practice of social life is shaped by ‘the more than or less than rational’, recognizing the
35
36 importance of the emotional and the affectual in ‘the composition of harmonious or
37
38 disharmonious relations amongst diverse collectivities of human and non-humans’ (Anderson
39
40 2006: 735). The concept of affect has been widely used to describe the transpersonal capacity
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42 that bodies possess to ‘move’ and be moved by one another (Anderson 2006). Dewsbury (2009:
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44 21) suggests that approaching affect as relational medium and force produces an understanding
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46 of subjects as:
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49 ...caught and situated as bodies within radiating ripples and circuits of feeling, intensity,
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51 response and sensation, the flows of which wrap into and fold out of the body we call our
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3 own. There is then no such thing as a singular subject but rather a series of potential
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5 subjectivities that are multiple and emergent
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8 These affective relations are driven by desire; indeed, for Deleuze, desire is central to the
9
10 composition of the social (Probyn, 1996: 49). As Probyn explains, desire propels bodies into
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12 networks and relationships with other bodies and things in specific settings or milieu. These
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14 engagements of desire are made and unmade across bodies that are both biological but also
15
16 collective and political. For Deleuze, desire is not constituted by some primary lack (as in
17
18 Freudian terms) but is rather concerned with the desire for relations with others in order for
19
20 bodies to act, to do things (Lim, 2010). As we show in the next section, this conception has
21
22 particular potency for both recognizing disabled bodies' desires for connections and
23
24 engagements, and the ways in which such desires can be frustrated through marginalization and
25
26 exclusion (see also Duff 2011).
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31 Within NRT, an emphasis on relational practice, and upon the capacity of bodies to affect
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33 and be affected by others, is also bound up with an understanding of subjectivity as something
34
35 'radically contingent' upon, and emerging from, the specific happenings and experiences that
36
37 make up a social life (see Anderson and Harrison 2010: 13). This is an understanding of
38
39 subjectivity as process of *becoming*, reflecting what McCormack (2009: 277) describes as a
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41 'process-based ontology of movement in which the world is conceived of as a dynamic and
42
43 open-ended set of relational transformations'. Moreover, subjective becoming is not irreducible
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45 to, or confined within, the 'individual' but is understood as 'collective enterprise, 'external' to
46
47 the self while it also mobilizes the self's in-depth structures' (Braidotti 2003: 51).
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52 NRT's emphasis on the immediate or 'immanent' making of subjective experience
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54 through embodied and relational practice has important parallels with relational thinking in
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3 recent disability scholarship outlined earlier (Thomas, 2004; Bhaskar and Danermark, 2006). It
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5 also raises fundamental questions about the nature of ‘the social’ as something that can be
6
7 understood to transcend, and provide a pre-existing context for, both disabled and non-disabled
8
9 embodied experience. In non-representational theories, the social is not something that ‘can be
10
11 invoked to explain the durability of this or that practical ordering’ (Anderson and Harrison,
12
13 2010: 18). Instead the social is understood to comprise multiple orders that *depend on* the
14
15 repetition of practices for their composition. In one sense, the argument against a social order
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17 that pre-exists relational activity seems to suggest a world of infinite possibility and fluidity
18
19 (Jones, 2009). Yet, as Anderson and Harrison (2010) point out, the adoption of a relational
20
21 account of the social does not imply an absence of enduring orders or the harms and inequalities
22
23 that flow from such orders. Rather:
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29 Beginning from the social as a practical achievement provides a method for thinking
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31 through how systematic processes of harm *become* systematic (18, emphasis in original)
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34 Lim (2010) offers an insightful discussion of how we might understand the process through
35
36 which difference and inequality become systematic, drawing together the Deleuzian concepts of
37
38 affect and machinism. He argues that while what a body can do emerges from a field of potential
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40 that contains a multiplicity of possible outcomes, this virtual field of potential is an ‘impure
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42 space’ shaped in part by ‘virtual memories’ that reflect previous actualized relations between
43
44 bodies (also Grosz, 2005: 97). In this sense, the virtual contains both the potential to behave
45
46 differently but also fragments of memory – clusters of affect that are partly conscious/
47
48 unconscious – that suggest ‘how bodies should properly relate to other bodies’ (2010: 2399). As
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53 Lim notes:
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3 If we think of affect in terms of both the potentiality to repeat a functional arrangement of
4 bodies and the potentiality to do something new – to disorganize and disorder the body
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6 and its relations in order that they may be reordered – then the emergence of affect
7
8 becomes a political problem to be interrogated
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12 For Lim, approaching the political problem of affect requires a concurrent understanding of the
13 mechanisms through which bodies are connected with other bodies and with their environments,
14 something that resonates with disability scholars' emphasis on the disabling/enabling character
15 of different social-spatial contexts. For Deleuze, bodies connect and combine with other bodies
16 through social machines or machinic assemblages, producing particular organizations and
17 functional capacities. Such machines are organized and powered by desire, the desire of bodies
18 to enter into relations with other bodies in order to do things (Lim, 2010; also Probyn, 1996;
19 Anderson and McFarlane, 2011). It is within these machines that specific affects are actualized.
20 On the one hand, machines have the capacity for repetition, actualizing existing affective
21 patterns that reflect memories of how different bodies *should* relate to one another that, in turn,
22 reproduce 'habitual circuits of sense-making' (Bissell, 2010: 483 in Dewsbury, 2011). On the
23 other, machines have the potential to produce other connections and affects that reflect the
24 specificity of each event and encounter. Moreover, machines can be disrupted and reconfigured
25 to produce new assemblages, in and through which new and less oppressive affects may be
26 actualized and new forms of becoming initiated (Ruddick, 2012). As we suggest in the following
27 sections, a focus on what desiring bodies can or cannot do within specific assemblages has
28 important implications for how we think about the 'emergent' character of both disabled and
29 non-disabled subjects.
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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

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

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24 Crucially, a relational material approach directs attention to the ways in which subjective
25 experiences of *both* disability *and* non-disability emerge through shifting relations with other
26 bodies, objects and spaces. For example, Bissell's (2009) work on his experience of chronic pain
27 offers one exploration of such an approach. While always experienced in and through the body,
28 Bissell (2009) suggests that conceived as a set of intensities:
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36 ...chronic pain might not be an enemy to be overcome, where life can begin once its
37 intensity has waned, but just an *encounter with force*. This imperative is not aligned with
38 the rather nauseating idea of 'always looking on the bright side', but rather promises that
39 bodies are always more than one particular set of intensities. My body will always be
40 more than pain... (925-6, emphasis in original)
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48 In Bissell's work, there is not a discounting of subjective experience, but rather a conceptual
49 reworking that decentres the subjective, while recognizing those forces that work above, below,
50 within and beyond bodies, and from which subjective becoming emerges.
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3 Macpherson (2009; 2010) also provides insight into the ways that fields of force operate
4 to shape subjective becoming. In her research on visually impaired people's engagement with
5 landscape, Macpherson argues that human subjectivity and landscape emerge 'inter-corporeally'
6 through shifting encounters between human bodies, the material landscape, embodied memories,
7 and enduring assumptions about how to 'see' landscape. Her analysis illustrates the ways in
8 which different fields of force – for example, elements of the material surroundings such as
9 weather, light, and terrain; the affective intensities and physical interactions between the bodies
10 of guides and walkers; the shifting nature and extent of visual impairment/residual vision; and
11 prevailing norms about how bodies should engage with landscape – come together to shape and
12 constrain inter-corporeal emergence.¹ Crucially, for Macpherson, the 'doing' of body-landscape
13 relations contributes to the co-emergence of both sighted guides and visually impaired walkers'
14 subjectivities. In this way, a relational approach grounded in NRT 'can compel us to think of
15 how we emerge through, are responsible to, and have an embodied 'debt' to others' (2009:
16 1052).

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37 A similar theme is developed in Worth's (2013) study of high school students with visual
38 impairment. For Worth, students develop their experiences and understanding of what it is to
39 have, and to not have, a visual impairment through intense and shifting social relations with
40 peers and teachers in the context of specific educational settings. Rich with emotion and
41 embodiment, this co-emergence of dis/abled subjectivities is characterized by Worth as an
42 ongoing 'push and pull between how young people see themselves and the consequences of how
43 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.

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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.

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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

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2
3 Deleuze to think about the ways in which children's bodies *become* in the context of specific
4
5 assemblages, the authors argue that:
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8 We cannot presume a priori that one context is more or less inclusive than another... how
9
10 children perceive, navigate, conform to or contest different discursive cultures and
11
12 physical infrastructures of home, school and neighbourhood is key (213)
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15 Other recent work on young people's experiences of educational spaces also illustrates the
16
17 importance of a relational perspective. 'Inclusive education', with disabled children and young
18
19 people taught in 'mainstream' school spaces alongside their able-bodied peers, is now favoured
20
21 in the Global North (Goodfellow, 2012). As part of this movement, it is common for separate
22
23 areas or classrooms to be created within schools, for children with learning disabilities and
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25 behavioural/emotional issues to receive part of their learning. There are benefits to this,
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27 providing additional support for learning and, for some, a 'refuge' from the challenging
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29 environment of the school's corridors and open spaces (Holt, 2010a; Holt et al., 2012). However,
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31 conceived relationally, the character of a specific classroom or school setting can be understood
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33 as something that emerges from its connections with particular networks of teachers, parents,
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35 students and policymakers, and in relation to particular configurations of signage, seating
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37 arrangements, timetables, learning technologies and teaching practices, and official curricula.
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43 Such an approach resists the static classification of such spaces as either inclusive or
44
45 exclusionary, recognizing that the way they are inhabited and interpreted within the context of
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47 specific relational networks will help determine their meaning and status (Goodfellow 2012). At
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49 the same time, as Holt (2010b) has recognized, these relationally constituted spaces can and do
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51 persist over time, shaping the subjective becoming of the young people therein. This finding is
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53 consistent with Jones' (2009) broader argument about the need to balance a fluid and relationally
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3 mobile conception of space with recognition of the fields of force that structure, frame, scale and
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5 institutionalize particular spatial orders over time.
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8 *Dis/abling Assemblages*
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10 Recent work also directs attention to the ways in which dis/abled bodies' capacities to act and the
11 possibilities for subjective becoming are shaped and constrained by the workings of machinic
12 assemblages. Both Worth (2013) and Smith (2012), for example, are clear that the relations that
13 animate subjective becoming in educational settings and public spaces are far from consensual
14 and straightforward. In these and other spaces, 'systematic processes of harm' (cf. Anderson and
15 Harrison, 2010) limit what certain (impaired and other) bodies can do, closing down the field of
16 potential in and through which these bodies might enter into relations with other bodies.
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27 This point can be illustrated through consideration of the ways in which dis/abled bodies'
28 capacities for action are shaped and constrained by formal care systems as machinic assemblage.
29 Consider, for example, the relational space constituted by an encounter between someone living
30 with a significant mobility impairment and a personal support worker. In one sense, this
31 encounter may involve one body doing something to and for another body – e.g. helping with
32 dressing and bathing – often in combination with other bodies and objects (bed, wheelchair,
33 hoist) (Munro, 2013). At the same time, the intimate co-mingling of bodies in this setting can
34 also be understood to produce a complex and shifting mix of affects. These intimate relations and
35 the affects that circulate within them are situated within and shaped by a broader care
36 assemblage constituted by overlapping publicly and privately funded systems of provision that
37 determine access, the quality and quantity of care provided, as well as the wages and working
38 conditions of paid care providers.
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3 In recent decades, the shifting nature of formal care assemblages in many Western
4 countries, particularly the outsourcing and downgrading of publicly funded care provision, has
5 shaped relational contexts in ways that limit what bodies – both those of recipient and provider –
6 can do. Such assemblages, following Lim (2010), produce particular judgments – whether
7 unconscious or otherwise – about how bodies are *supposed* to behave. Sentiments concerning the
8 ‘difficult’ or ‘needy’ client or the ‘lazy’ or ‘insensitive’ worker can be intensified within a
9 context of limited support hours and precarious work, in ways that ‘fix’ subjectivities and
10 actualize particular affective patterns and prejudices (Cranford and Miller, 2013). In this context,
11 opportunities for bodies to co-mingle and depend upon one another are impoverished, and other
12 opportunities for subjective becoming are foreclosed. Yet we can also imagine a different care
13 assemblage in which adequate hours of support and secure employment allow for the emergence
14 of a relational space of ‘being with’ between care recipient and provider – an unrushed moment
15 of meaningful encounter (Cranford and Miller, 2013). Such relational settings open up the
16 possibility of other forms of encounter and subjective becoming across and between dis/abled,
17 gendered and racialized bodies constituted through the provision and receipt of care.
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39 Similar concerns are present in recent work on learning disability (Hall, 2013; Power
40 2008, 2013). Power (2013), for example, draws attention to the ways in which care services for
41 people with learning disabilities, such as day centres and group accommodation, are being
42 gradually phased out, with users encouraged instead to participate in broader local environments
43 of caring’, making ‘natural connections’ (68) with others in everyday spaces (see also Wiesel
44 and Bigby, 2014). While an emphasis on people belonging to, and acting within, everyday places
45 is to be welcomed, Power (2013) cautions that a sense of belonging is not easily achieved,
46 requiring significant and carefully negotiated work by family members, support workers and
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3 people with disabilities themselves. While not couched explicitly in this language, Power's
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5 concerns might be understood as addressing the nature and extent of the relations people will be
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7 able to cultivate, the kinds of affective intensities that are created and circulated in these spaces
8
9 (e.g. joy, happiness, anger, frustration, fear), and the forms of subjective becoming made
10
11 possible. Thinking in this way raises important political questions about the organization of
12
13 health and social care systems as assemblages, and how these might be changed to 'create ways
14
15 of living differently' (Lim, 2010: 2407).
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22 **IV Critical Geographies of the 'Able-Body'**

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24 In this final substantive section of the paper we move beyond the becomings of disabled bodies,
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26 to consider what relationality and NRT can offer to a critical geography of the *able*-body.
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29 Chouinard et al (2010) noted that the focus on disability has meant inattention to the 'normality'
30
31 of ability, 'While there has long been recognition that the privileges of the able-body and mind
32
33 are reproduced through the oppression of the disabled 'other', there have been few attempts to
34
35 systematically unpack these 'able' categories' (17). In response, they posed three questions:
36
37 'How are able-bodiedness and able-mindedness produced as geographically and historically
38
39 contingent constructs? What types of knowledge, practices and spaces are implicated in their
40
41 reproduction? How might they be destabilised?' Geographers have yet to address these
42
43 questions, and they have only recently begun to receive attention in disability studies (Campbell,
44
45 2009; Goodley, 2014). Yet efforts to develop a critical account of ability are essential in efforts
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47 to challenge ableism and to make possible other forms of subjective becoming that do not begin
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49 from the binary opposition of the de/valued dis/abled body. Here we identify two paths that
50
51 might provide the bases for such an account. The first draws on recent work in disability studies
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3 to explore the potential to unsettle or 'queer' the able-body. The second develops a broader
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5 conception of relational dependency in which able-bodied becomings can be understood as
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8 'needy' endeavours.
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10 *Unsettling the able-body*

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12 In recent work, Goodley (2014) develops what he terms a 'critical ableist approach' to
13
14 acknowledge and confront the beliefs, values and practices through which the 'normal' able self
15
16 is imagined and enacted, and the relations and environments through which it becomes. In earlier
17
18 writing, he summarises what he sees as the dominant facets of the able self: 'cognitively, socially
19
20 and emotionally able and competent; biologically and psychologically stable ...hearing, mobile,
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22 seeing, walking; sane, autonomous, self-sufficient ...economically viable' (Goodley, 2011: 79).
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27 It is against this set of deeply embedded characteristics that bodies are valued, judged and
28
29 deemed to be within or outside the realm of 'ability'. Echoing Gleeson's (1999) materialist
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31 analysis, and in some way answering Chouinard et al's (2010) first question set out above,
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33 Goodley (2014) sees these dominant notions of ability emergent within the 'ecosystem' of
34
35 neoliberalism, concluding that 'the functioning neoliberal self is an able-bodied and minded one'
36
37 (28); as such, able bodies are aligned with dominant cultural notions of competence, stability and
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39 independence.
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43 While *no-one* can satisfy all of the above criteria of ability, and *everyone* is in some way
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45 incompetent, unstable and dependent, such is its cultural dominance that this is not enough to
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47 unsettle or disrupt the able-body. Sothorn (2007) cites 'crip theory', a fusion of critiques from
48
49 queer theory and disability studies (McRuer, 2006), as a possible means to unsettle the able body
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51 through challenging the mutually reinforcing connection between heteronormativity and able-
52
53 bodiedness. In his study of 'sex manuals' aimed at disabled people, Sothorn (2007) argues that,
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3 while the manuals are positive in their celebration of disabled sexuality (so often denied), they
4 remain focused on sex as an individualised (and neoliberalised) practice of self-governance.
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8 Sothern (2007) objects to such uncritical normalisation, what he refers to as the desire to seek
9
10 ‘safe passage over the river of ableism and heteronormativity to some promised land of liberal
11 inclusion’ (157); instead, he continues ‘we must blow up the bridge!’ (ibid.). Crip theory can
12
13 disrupt the normality or naturalness of able-bodied neoliberal, individualised sex (and so let
14
15 *everyone* ‘off the hook’), and further, can contribute to the dismantling of ableism itself, by
16
17 broadening the scope of what it is to be human. Inspired by queer theory’s commitment to non-
18
19 definable, becoming (sexual) subjectivities, a crip perspective recognises the ‘fluid,
20
21 intersectional, and contingent articulations of bodies, cultures and power’ (Elman, 2012: 318,
22
23 cited in Goodley, 2014: 38-9); *all* bodies are emergent, unfinished and relational (with other
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25 bodies and objects), shaped by everyday practices of affect and desire, yet within the constraints
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27 and contexts of dominant sociospatial-cultural constructions of dis/ability.
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35 There are useful parallels between Sothern’s approach to ‘cripping’ the able-body and
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37 Saldanha’s (2007) groundbreaking work on unsettling or ‘freaking’ whiteness. For Saldanha,
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39 freaking whiteness entails a proliferation of race. In this way: ‘race’s energies are then directed at
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41 multiplying racial differences, so as to render them joyfully cacophonous... When racial
42
43 formations crumble and mingle like this, the dominance of whiteness in the global racial
44
45 assemblage is undermined’ (2007: 199). In similar fashion, drawing attention to the shifting and
46
47 prolific diversity of bodily sizes and forms, sensory acuities, cognitive abilities, mental states,
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49 illnesses, injuries and other differences begins to undo the taken-for-granted dualism between a
50
51 valued able-body and its disabled ‘other’. Recent work on fatness offers one example of such a
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53 proliferation. Longhurst (2010) shows that becoming ‘fat’ is an intensely intercorporeal and
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3 intersubjective experience. Women in her study spoke of the social stigmatisation of their bodies
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5 by people, objects and spaces (e.g. staff, chairs and changing rooms in clothes shops) (see also
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7 Colls and Evans, 2014). Yet fatness refuses categorisation within the dis/ability dualism; fat
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9 bodies are neither 'able' in the terms dictated by society (see above) nor are they easily classified
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11 as disabled. In this way such bodies disrupt the dis/ability dualism, directing our attention instead
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13 to the experiences and becomings of people with diverse body shapes and capabilities.
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18 *Towards an affirmative conception of dependency*

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20 A second path is concerned with what a relational approach might offer to our understanding of
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22 the 'able-body' and its dependencies. Central to a relational/material approach is an
23
24 understanding that bodies are capable of action only to the extent that they enter into relations
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26 with other human/non-human bodies. Certain kinds of relations – the combining of bodies and
27
28 the kindling of certain affective intensities – may exhibit tendencies that enhance a body's ability
29
30 to act, while others may constrain or shut down the potential for action (Adkins, 2015: 97; also
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32 Ruddick, 2012). As Fox (2002: 356) suggests, these affective relations are myriad in nature,
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34 reflecting multiple forces: 'of biology, of environment, of culture and reflexivity and of the
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36 aspirational potential which all living things possess'. To the extent that new connections
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38 enhance a body's capacity to act, they create the potential to actualize new ways of becoming.
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44 Dewsbury (2011) uses the relationship between bicycle and human cyclist as an example
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46 of these processes. Drawing on Raunig (2010), he suggests that the flow between bicycle and
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48 cyclist is constitutive of an intensive environment in which the mingling of bodies affords and
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50 generates 'the capacity for, and territory within which, that individual develops new modes of
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52 movement and social interaction' (150). Over time, repeated and increasingly habitual enactment
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3 of biking stabilizes this assemblage, and it is these habitual activities ‘through which we discern
4 our place in the world and autopoietically gain our definition at the same time’ (151).
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8 There are interesting parallels between Dewsbury’s (2011) account and work by Jonasson
9 (2014) on the AKKA board, a mobility device for people with significant physical impairments.²
10 For Jonasson, movement is produced ‘inter-corporeally’ as the disabled person, care providers,
11 the AKKA board and the material surroundings combine. As Jonasson notes, in one sense the
12 experience might be thought to produce greater individual choice and independence but in
13 practice it is ‘difficult to separate the AKKA board from the person using it and the person
14 preparing its path’ (2014: 487). What is accomplished is collaborative, provisional and
15 relationally embedded. Subjective experience emerges across the intensive environment formed
16 by the co-mingling of both human and non-human bodies.
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29 Drawing these parallels between different forms of subjective becoming (both of which
30 occur in relation to different types of ‘assistive technology’) is significant if we understand the
31 creation of both intensive environments in terms of *dependency*. In other words, such an
32 approach recognizes the way in which all bodies depend on combinations and connections with
33 others to act and subjectively become. We recognize that this is not the only way to critically
34 approach issues of in/dependence. Feminist scholarship on ethics of care has conceived of care
35 not only as a set of practical acts, but also as a set of relations between people (e.g., Popke, 2006;
36 Lawson, 2007; Cox, 2010; Atkinson et al, 2011). Yet Atkinson et al (2011: 570) caution that
37 even within a feminist ethic of care that values interdependency, ‘dependency and vulnerability
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52 ² Jonasson (2014) characterizes the AKKA-board as a mobility device that is formerly classified as an electric
53 wheelchair but one that is primarily used by persons with more significant disabilities who require a control system
54 that is different from the traditional wheelchair. It runs by following a laid out circuit of electrical tape on the floor,
55 using cameras positioned underneath the device. As Jonasson notes, the operation of the device involves more than
56 just the driver; it also enrolls parents, institutional staff and others in a ‘creative’ process.
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3 still bear negative connotations and reproduce dominant ideas, theoretical categories and
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5 subjectivities that continue to devalue care'. These authors argue that there is a need for ongoing
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7 work to challenge such enduring conceptions of dependency. We argue here that foregrounding
8
9 the relational nature of becoming, and the extent to which all bodies desire and depend upon
10
11 connections with other human and non-human bodies, provides one way to advance what might
12
13 be understood as an *affirmative* conception of dependency.
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17 This effort to extend a condition of relational dependency is not meant to imply a denial
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19 of bodily difference or a 'universalist sensibility' (Tolia-Kelly, 2005) that fails to acknowledge
20
21 the fields of force that limit the capacities and potentialities of different bodies (Colls, 2012). It
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23 necessitates careful attention to the mechanisms through which disabled bodies continue to be
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25 positioned in Campbell's (2005: 109) terms as 'ontologically intolerable'. Such an effort will
26
27 also need to recognize the varying capacities of different bodies. This attention to difference
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29 comes through clearly in Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) discussion of bodily becoming. Here,
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31 they argue that what a body can do is determined by its longitude and latitude, where 'latitude is
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33 made up of intensive parts falling under a capacity, and longitude of extensive parts falling under
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35 a relation (256-257). In this view, the nature of a body is determined by both the multiplicity of
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37 different (intensive) parts that make it up and those other 'parts' - bodies, things, objects - with
38
39 which it is able to enter into a relation. While recognizing the differences among bodies with
40
41 respect to their intensive parts and capacities, this approach rejects a physiological understanding
42
43 of bodies in terms of 'organs and functions' in favour of an ethical approach in which: 'the
44
45 organic characteristics *derive from* longitude and its relations, from latitude and its degrees'
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47 (257). What this line of thinking offers is a framework for disability geography to systematically
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49 examine the dependencies that underlie 'able-bodied' becoming. This entails making clear the
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3 neediness of such bodies, and concurrently directing critical attention to the assemblages in and
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5 through which these relational dependencies are enacted and sustained.
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8 Recent scholarship on mobility provides one example of such work. Cresswell (2010;
9
10 2012) has made a strong case for the importance of mobility as a major resource in contemporary
11
12 social life, with the differential distribution of this resource playing a central role in ‘the
13
14 production of social hierarchies’ (2012: 651). Mobility scholarship has begun to unpack forms of
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16 taken-for-granted movement. Work on mundane mobilities, for example, points to the practical
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18 and geographical competencies that allow people ‘to meet for pleasure, get to work on time, and
19
20 pick the kids up on time’ (Binnie et al, 2007: 166; also Middleton, 2010). Yet, as disability
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22 scholars have effectively demonstrated, not all people are able to enact these competencies in the
23
24 context of built environments and transportation systems that actively exclude ‘bodies that d[o]
25
26 not fit with expectations of dominant ‘normal’ shape and ability’ (Andrews et al 2012: 1928).
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31 A relational approach directs critical attention to the apparent ‘ease’ and naturalness with
32
33 which certain non-impaired bodies move. In turn, this provides a way to question ‘conceptions of
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35 the mobile subject *as the embodiment of the physiological norms of the able body*’ (Imrie, 2012:
36
37 2261, emphasis added). Instead, we can approach mobile ‘able bodied’ subjectivity as something
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39 that emerges across a series of dependencies - upon other people, on assistive technologies, on
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41 prosthetics, on transportation systems, and material environments that are attuned to the intensive
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43 capacities of specific bodies (e.g., Imrie, 2012; Andrews et al, 2012).
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48 This approach may be particularly provocative when applied to the question of walking,
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50 given that the capacity to engage in this ‘simple’ act has been understood as central to
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52 being/becoming fully human (and masculine) (see Cresswell, 2010). As Ingold’s (2004)
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54 fascinating account demonstrates, however, varieties of (human) walking abound and these
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3 emerge from, and are constitutive of, specific socio-cultural contexts. On this basis, he argues
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5 that there is no: ‘essential body plan, given for all humans in advance of the conditions of their
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7 life in the world... There is no standard form of the human foot, or of bipedal locomotion, apart
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9 from the forms that actually take shape in the course of routine pedestrian operations (336).
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11 Moreover, Ingold’s work demonstrates the *relational* nature of these routine pedestrian
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13 operations. Tracing the emergence of a particular type of European walking, he argues that its
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15 enactment was dependent upon particular kinds of prosthetics (e.g., leather boots and shoes) that
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17 changed the form of the foot, and the creation of particular material environments that: ‘literally
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19 paved the way for the boot-clad pedestrian to exercise his feet as a stepping machine’ (326). As
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21 such, this work provides a useful one example of how we might shed light on able-bodied
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23 becoming.
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32 **V Conclusion**

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34 Our aim in this paper has been to push for further engagement with relational thinking in the
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36 geographies of disability. Specifically, we have tried to highlight and extend explicit conceptual
37
38 linkages between key elements of non-representational theory and emerging work by disability
39
40 scholars. Notwithstanding the limits of a single paper, our hope is that these linkages and
41
42 provocations will spur further discussion and debate in this field of study. In this conclusion, we
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44 draw attention to some of the conceptual, political, methodological and empirical implications
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46 that arise from the preceding discussion.
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51 Conceptually, we have deliberately focused attention in this paper on the ways in which
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53 NRT’s emphasis on the immanent materiality of social life – the ‘doings’ of bodies in relation
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55 with other bodies, objects and space – offers provocative ways of thinking through disabled and
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3 non-disabled becoming. At the same time, we are conscious of the limits and shortcomings of
4 this approach. As one example, the privileging of doing over knowing – what Barnett (2008: 89)
5 identifies as the ontological privileging of affect as a pre-conscious ‘priming to act’ in recent
6 NRT work – risks eschewing the importance of conscious interpretation and representation as
7 processes through which subjects are affected by, make sense of, and act in the world (see also
8 Pile, 2010; Andrews et al, 2014). This is particularly salient given that representations of
9 dis/ability continue to shape in profound ways what specific bodies can or cannot do in specific
10 material environments and relational encounters. Recent work on transportation planning, for
11 example, shows that disabled people’s needs and capacities are often excluded from, or
12 misrepresented within, design consultations and planning documents that inform changes to
13 material environments (Bromley et al., 2007; Van Hoven and Elzinga, 2009; Imrie, 2012). These
14 representations embody enduring assumptions about the kinds of bodies and the types of
15 movement that are deemed appropriate within the public space of the city, and are thus critical to
16 sustaining the broader material assemblages in and through which im/mobilities are enacted.
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18 Moving forward, more attention is needed to the ways in which the embodied actions and
19 interactions that underlie subjective becoming are inextricably and inferentially (cf. Barnett,
20 2008) linked to myriad representations of dis/ability.
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43 The relational focus of NRT also poses a number of challenges for disability politics. As
44 Macpherson (2010) cautions, the ‘sceptical humanism’ of NRT may not sit well with the
45 pragmatic political aims of disability scholarship and activism, which have often been grounded
46 in ‘authentic’ accounts of a disabled subject. However, we would argue that there are ways in
47 which this sceptical humanism can be drawn upon to expand and reinvigorate disability politics.
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49 In particular, the decentering of the subject in NRT connects in important ways with recent work
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3 on learning/ intellectual disability that has problematized the ‘autonomous individual’ as political
4 actor. A prevailing ideology of a stable subject operating within a framework of individual rights
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6 has clearly empowered some disabled people – for example, claiming their place in higher
7
8 education, and securing personalised packages of support. Yet the insistence on independence
9
10 and autonomy as a basis for a disability politics fails to accommodate the range of embodied
11
12 capacities possessed by a diverse population of disabled people. More fundamentally, it fails to
13
14 acknowledge that all persons (both disabled and non-disabled) depend to a greater or lesser
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16 extent on human and non-human others for their capacity to act.
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22 In place of an authentic subject, a relational material approach encourages a shift towards
23 a disability politics based on *practice*. This is articulated by Elizabeth Grosz (2005: 88), drawing
24 from Deleuze, who argues that the political struggles of subjugated peoples should be understood
25 as: ‘as struggles for practice, struggles at the level of the pragmatic, struggles around the right to
26 act, do and make’. A shift from identity to practice also directs attention to the nature of, and
27 potential for, political alliances between disabled people and diverse human and non-human
28 others in the pursuit of more enabling and inclusive social formations. As Leitner and Strunk
29 (2014) suggest in their work on immigrant advocacy, shifting connections between different
30 groups, organizations, places and strategies can themselves be approached as complex political
31 assemblages. Such an approach might be usefully adopted to explore, for example, the shifting
32 relations that exist between disabled people, advocacy organizations, family members, charities,
33 support workers, labour unions, state institutions and other bodies working to shape the
34 conditions of everyday life.
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52 Methodologically, to the extent that we give analytical attention to the non-
53 representational whether this is the agentic capacity of material objects and environments or the
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3 pre-conscious affects that move bodies to act, this will require methodological approaches that
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5 move beyond the collection of 'representable' personal testimony to capture the ways which
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7 bodies are moved to in/action within specific fields of force. Macpherson's (2010) own use of
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9 ethnography offers an excellent illustration of such an approach, providing access to the
10
11 embodied practice of walking (see also Macpherson and Bleasdale, 2012; Fox and Macpherson,
12
13 2015). Elsewhere, Bigby and Wiesel (2011; also Wiesel et al 2013) use 'mobile' observation to
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15 document encounters between intellectually disabled people and non-disabled others in public
16
17 spaces of the city. This work offers important insight on the materiality of encounters (e.g. how
18
19 bodies attract or repel one another, what facial expressions might un/intentionally convey) that
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21 moves beyond what is or is not said. Moreover, efforts to move beyond 'authentic' narratives of
22
23 subjective experience may have positive consequences for those who have been positioned
24
25 outside of what is conventionally 'representable'. As Wiesel et al (2013: 2395) note: 'the method
26
27 of observation allowed us to include in the study people with more severe intellectual disability
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29 or complex communication needs who would have difficulty communicating their experiences in
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31 an interview'.
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39 Finally, the preceding discussion of the 'able-body' suggests that we need to think
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41 creatively about ways to empirically document the kinds of knowledge, relational practices and
42
43 social spaces implicated in the process of *becoming able*. While there are many potential
44
45 directions here, we have suggested two possible avenues for future work. The first of these,
46
47 concerned with the proliferation of dis/ability, suggests that we need to give further empirical
48
49 attention to the sheer diversity of embodied experiences that overwhelm any binary opposition
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51 between a normative 'able-body' and its disabled other. Important work in this regard has
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53 already been completed on emotional difficulties (Holt, 2010b), chronic and episodic physical
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3 illness (Stone et al. 2014), and obesity (Longhurst, 2010), but more work is needed to highlight
4
5 the multiplicity of bodies that come to be understood as 'able'. Second, a focus on relational
6
7 dependencies suggests that we need to make explicit the specific relational connections and
8
9 material contexts that allow 'able bodies' to act with apparent ease.
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11

12 13 14 **Acknowledgements**

15
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17
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19
20

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