Equity, Inclusion, and Diversity

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Disability Incarcerated

Disability Incarcerated: A Symposium

Sunday, March 8
5:30 PM

Sins Invalid

A DRUMMING CALL TO LEGBA FOLLOWED BY PARTICIPATORY ALTAR CONSTRUCTION. The altar will commemorate disabled people police and killed by parents/caregivers for not performing "able-bodied-ness";

Monday, March 9

Disability Incarcerated: A Symposium

9:00 AM - 5:30 PM

Disability Incarcerated: A Symposium

Full schedule at diversity.berkeley.edu/disabilityincarcerated

A symposium and gathering that responds to the recent book of that title, bringing together the editors and other scholars, students, activists, and community members to map the intersections of policing, imprisonment, and the disabled body. The event seeks to step into the conspicuous void within critiques of the "prison industrial complex" - namely the absence of discussion of disability oppression, despite the disproportionate representation of people with disabilities within prisons and gated institutions.

Sunday, March 8
5:30 PM

Disability Liberated: MOURN THE DEAD AND FIGHT LIKE HELL FOR THE LIVING

Sins Invalid

A DRUMMING CALL TO LEGBA FOLLOWED BY PARTICIPATORY ALTAR CONSTRUCTION. The altar will commemorate disabled people policed and killed by parents/caregivers for not performing "able-bodied-ness";
Good morning everyone. Wow. It is such an honour to be here. I am so very grateful to Sue and to everyone else who organized this incredibly exciting event. Thank you.

I’m going to talk this morning about some of the historical and theoretical work that frames Disability Incarcerated. I’ve called my talk, “How wide we cast our net of analysis, and why it matters.” Right now I’m showing that title on a slide, on top of an image of the book cover.

The analysis we bring to bear on something matters. Imagine if nobody had yet connected the US prison system to legacies of slavery. That matters. It changes the possibilities for thinking about the disproportionate imprisonment of Black people, the political function of prisons, the relationship between capitalism and imprisonment. The fact that this connection’s been made enables ways of thinking and acting. That’s really important. The frameworks and histories we bring to bear on our critique matter.

This morning I’ll give a few examples of why this matters in the context of the book, and then I’ll turn to some implications for thinking about confinement and institutionalization today – in which I include penal imprisonment but don’t mean to centre it any more consistently than I intend to centre nursing homes or even day treatment programs.

My first example of why we need to cast our net wider than has often been the case goes like this: in disability studies, it’s not hard to find reference to the fact that Indigenous and Black people weren’t usually subjected to the horrors of the earliest confinements –
land and sexual violence. The visual is only her talking, and I’m sorry there’s no subtitles. I hope it’s clear and brief enough for ASL interpreters to follow.

“there was a problem with our analysis,” she says. “We were not seeing that these two processes were actually part of the same thing.” And as her work so powerfully illustrates, naming that connection makes a difference to how people can collectively come together to transform things. I want to draw a parallel between what she’s describing here and some of the work we tried to do in Disability Incarcerated.

Angela Davis cites Hirsh, who says of plantation slavery and the post-emancipation prison system, (quote) “Both institutions subordinated their subjects to the will of others. Like Southern slaves, prison inmates followed a daily routine specified by their superiors.” One thing that’s really interesting about this analysis is that it doesn’t apply to the place we might most expect to find it – that is, to the relationship between the earliest confinements and the ones we live with today. The earliest confinements, for the most part, didn’t bother with what people did with their time. They were very simply about removing people from society, whether they were called, jails, poorhouses, or even hospitals. And so we have slavery and the almshouse, co-existing in the same historical moment. One is a simple dumping ground, and the other violently coerces bodies and souls to do very particular things in very particular ways. But the two are entirely distinct systems at this point. And neither was believed to change people for the better.
example, think of today’s supermax prison. Nobody think’s it’s rehabilitative. But this is imagined as an exception to the rule, when all efforts have already been made to rehabilitate by the system it’s only one part of.

Now, in the same period as the education of intellectually disabled people was born, emerged the mass movement attempting to remove every Indigenous child from her home and place her in a white-run boarding school. The ability to say and perhaps really believe that these institutions were (quote) “schools” mattered – even though teaching things like reading and writing was a small part of what they actually did. But they were certainly entrusted to do the work that was called civilizing. And that was enabled by the move toward confinement as transformative. The practice of forcibly holding someone away from their home and community and using this as a strategy to make them into a different kind of person – that was first experimented with in asylums and penitentiaries. And it became a crucial, central, tool of colonial violence, especially in white settler colonies like Canada, Australia, and the US.

Disability confinement and boarding schools for Indigenous children aren’t usually discussed in histories of imprisonment. And histories of colonization and disability tend to be just as exclusive. The differences amongst them matter, of course, but we also need to work toward holding these particular histories in relationship with one another, as they interlock to create the varied sites of confinement and institutionalization we live with today. If we map these various histories onto one another, we start to get the sense that – as Andrea Smith put it earlier – “these processes were actually part of the same thing.”
tend to now exist in today’s dumping ground sites, so that efforts are made to influence people’s behaviour even if nobody believes they’ll ever really change. I’ll come back to this below.

But first, here’s another thing that makes something an institution: However dumping ground or rehabilitative in intent, an institution is a place where one’s relationship with other humans is highly regulated. People are either paid to be there or made to be there. Relationships amongst those who are made to be there are often closely scrutinized and controlled. And the relationships between service providers and service users – or guards and inmates, or whatever – are regulated even more strictly. As a result, maybe a resident or inmate or consumer is never allowed physical contact with anybody in this space, which might be the only place she has human contact at all – even if it’s only a day program. And this rule might be rationalized due to concerns about particular kinds of abuse. But then the only exception might be when the people paid to be there physically restrain her, which is rendered non-abusive and perhaps even called therapeutic. But what does it mean for a human life if physical restraints are the only physical human contact they’re allowed? And what does it mean if the rest of us consider this inevitable?

As a result of these first two characteristics of institutionalization, what also exists in institutions is a highly particular form of public, collective, and socially sanctioned violence – restraints being an easy example, but not the only one. Countless institutional sites feature treatment plans or policy and procedures manuals or staff communication logs instructing all staff to consistently intervene in this kind of behaviour this way, to
consequential ethical deliberation takes place. This distinguishes institutional abuses from abuse in other contexts.

One of the things that holds institutional rationalities together is what Asad describes as “an optimistic project of universal empowerment with a pessimistic account of human motivation” – that is to say, some people will not do the work they need to do to improve their lives, unless they’re made to do it (62). And this interlocks with the valuing of some forms of human life and the denigration of others. We all learn where these dividing lines lie. It’s better to act like a ruling class nondisabled European-descent child than to act like any other kind of child. It’s better to let your family starve than to steal. And it’s not really okay to accept charity either. It’s better to walk independently than to use a cane or wheelchair. It’s better to sit still and listen than to have your mind wander. It’s better to see and hear only the things that others see and hear. And it’s better to see and hear than to be blind or Deaf. Certain ways of being require alteration; others just don’t. Certain ways of being are of value to us all; others are not. This is disablism, racism, classism, yes, and what enables it all is normatively differentiated valuing of human lives. The normative practice of valuing some humans more than others – some ways of being more than others – is, I think, essentially what we’re really up against here.

Here’s a short clip of disability scholar Carol Gill describing how this informs how disabled people get talked about and treated by professionals. The only image is her.
conditions after being arrested for petty violations of Jim Crow laws? These are just some of the hauntings that need to inform ... activism, and scholarship today—real people who lived and died confined.... And how can we live in a way that's also accountable ... to children ... born tomorrow ... who, because of disability, race, or class, are born disproportionately likely to live all or part of their lives in the terrible spaces of [confinement or institutionalization]? This future —that of the Ashleys and the Emilys of tomorrow—... has to be contended with, today.

Thank you.
Dear Elliott, first of all, thank you enormously for the co-sponsorship; Chris Chapman's talk was in many ways the highlight of the event. (He's wonderful; if there's any way Canadian studies can bring him out from York, I highly recommend it. Here is a weblink to the publicity for the event; it includes a link to the flyer.

http://diversity.berkeley.edu/disabilityincarcerated

For your background information: here is the transcript of Chris's talk, attached.

I hope this is helpful—and thanks again. All best, Sue

[Quoted text hidden]

Chris BerkeleyTalk.docx

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