

Disability Politics & Theory

REVISED AND EXPANDED EDITION

A.J. Withers

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Foreword

by Robyn Maynard

A.J. WITHERS' REVISED AND EXPANDED EDITION of *Disability Politics and Theory* is right on time. As I'm writing up this foreword in late August 2023, communities across the Northwest Territories are under evacuation orders from the threat of forest fires, in a fire season that has seen more area burned than at any point in Canadian history. Over the radio in my kitchen, public health officials are predicting a wave of yet another new COVID-19 variant for the coming fall. And while the police killings of Black folks that were brought to media attention by historic protests in 2020 continue unabated, so does state repression against racial justice organizers. While it may not be immediately apparent, the politics of disability are intricately woven into each of these — and they are woven, too, into the crises to come. In this epoch of multiple and overlapping catastrophes — of which global heating, pandemics and police murders of Black folks are only a few — ableism, which, as Withers reminds us, ought to be called *disablism*, is a structuring logic. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (2020) notes that people living with disabilities are structurally “at greater risk from the adverse impacts of climate change” (15), particularly during environmental crises resulting emergency displacement and interrupted health services. In the US, half of the people killed by police are *disabled* (Ruderman Family Foundation 2016) — may Sandra Bland and Laquan McDonald rest in power — and more than half of Black people with disabilities will have been arrested by the time they turn 28 (McCauley 2017).

Not only are the politics of disability imbricated in every major social issue of our time, but the number of people becoming disabled is growing in a manner our society has yet to reckon with. Canada's chief science advisor, Dr. Mona Nemer, reported that long COVID threatens to be a “mass disabling event” of historic proportions, given the virus's demonstrable long-term and still largely unknown impacts on our bodies and cognition (Office of the Chief Science Advisor of Canada 2022). The impacts of the climate crisis, too — from raging fires and compromised air qualities to compromised water supplies and chronic malnutrition caused by droughts — will undoubtedly

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facilitate an expanding array of long-term health conditions. And as Withers notes, “globally, war and poverty are the greatest causes of impairment.” With every passing day, it’s more likely that even those who had, knowingly or unknowingly, labelled disabled peoples as disposable may find themselves and their family members in the same position. As a society, we ignore disability at our peril.

It is not my intention to fearmonger about the possibility of becoming disabled. As Withers reminds us, “There will always be differences between people; there will always be bodies, minds, actions and ways of being that are furthest from the norm. There will always be disability.” Neither do I mean to suggest that disability ought to become politically significant only because *it could happen to anybody*. Rather, I highlight the ubiquity of the increasing possibility of our community members becoming disabled in these times of crisis to remind us that the stakes of how our societies will choose to address the politics of disability have perhaps never been higher. This is not because *disability* is something to fear. Instead, as this beacon of a text makes clear, the way disabled peoples are made structurally expendable by our society, its institutions and even our progressive and radical social movements is what ought to invoke fear, anger and, more importantly, a desire for meaningful solidarity and radical change.

And so Withers’ text offers an anchor in what they so accurately describe as “a scary time.” It remains, even in a field and movement that is growing ever richer, among the most in-depth, nuanced and careful deliberations on the politics and theory of disability. Revised and expanded, the text’s important correctives engage more seriously with the links between race, colonialism and disability while addressing emergent scholarship and activist contributions and accounting for significant events — the politics of life and death under medical assistance in dying (MAiD), the triaging/withholding of care for disabled people during the COVID-19 outbreak and the impacts of ongoing vaccine hoarding in the West. Now as ever, *Disability Politics and Theory* holds a crucial space for critical thought and knowledge production on an issue that affects us all, whether we acknowledge it or not.

Withers insists that we approach disability from a politic of care and interdependence. They urge us to consider disability as a *social relation*, produced by and through the way our society organizes access, resources and power, in order to remind us that it is not disability itself, but the political decisions that *govern* disability, making disabled peoples expendable. This matters: politics can be changed, social relations can shift. But they will not do so on their own.

Since the publication of the original edition of this text in 2012, public discourse and awareness around disability as a social justice issue has

expanded. ASL and closed captioning are more common at live and digital events. However, as Withers makes clear, the proliferation of organizations and institutions now using the term *disability justice* to describe their work does not constitute a win in and of itself. If movements, NGOs, and public health organizations now much more often include *disability* and even the phrasing of *disability justice* within their umbrellas of terms, a dangerous lack of clarity in how these words are used remains. And so this text remains just as urgent, if not more so, as a failure to think through the *politics* of approaches to combatting disablism leaves even those genuinely committed to expanding liberation for all at risk of re-entrenching the very forms of oppression they wish to overturn.

In short: in our movements toward collective liberation, there is still *work to do*. Withers' does not shy away from that work. A through line of this text is an ongoing insistence that without attending to disablism, we risk reproducing the same marginalization that so many communities coming together to oppose in the first place. To help us understand how this came to be, Withers carefully assesses how disability has been addressed at an institutional and societal level: the eugenic model, the medical model and the rehabilitation model. Through careful historical excavation, they demonstrate how eugenics was practised not just by the Nazis, but it has often been wedded with mainstream policy. Just as importantly, disablism is found not only at the level of the state, but in and leftist social movements. As Withers illustrates, in the US as well as Canada, the women's movement, reproductive rights movements and 2SLGBTQI+ rights advocates, even radical leftists like Emma Goldman, have advocated for the sterilization of disabled peoples.

Taking us through the histories and politics of contemporary social justice organizing approaches to disability — the rights-based, social and social-relational models — Withers assesses the gains and most viable strategies without shying away from the tensions and contradictions. Their assessment is based on liberatory potential: movement frameworks and tactics are measured not in the earnestness of their desire to improve the lives of disabled peoples, but Withers addresses the *politics and theory* of disability in various organizing models through carefully evaluating their capacity to meaningfully include folks living through multiple axes of oppression. Colonialism, race, gender and class domination *intersect with* and are co-constituted by ability, as Withers establishes through the text. As such, they evaluate how different organizing models facilitate, or hinder, the possibility of addressing disability in a way that would meaningfully impact the lives of disabled folks at multiple intersections — which is to say, the majority of disabled peoples worldwide. Finally, building on their work as an organizer and the work of other

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impactful disability justice movements, Withers proposes their own template for change, advancing a revised radical model in relation to the principles of disability justice that centres collectivity, interdependence and the necessary opposition to capitalism, imperialism, authoritarianism and all oppression.

Our collective survival depends on *how* we chose to meet the challenges ahead, so our action needs to be grounded in deep knowledge. Withers not only offers us that knowledge but dares to insist on a vision for our collective futures in which disability is not used to govern someone's value in our society but instead seeds a future in which *no one is left behind*.

August 2023, Toronto

EXCERPT

Preface

AT MY FIRST PROTEST IN A new city, I hear the chant:

“Unhoused people under attack, what do we do?
Stand up! Fight back!”

This chant is often done repeatedly at protests. The caller says the first line, swapping out the oppressed group. The crowd repeats the second line:

“Indigenous people under attack, what do we do?
Stand up! Fight back!
Migrants under attack, what do we do?
Stand up! Fight back!
Disabled people under attack, what do we do?
Stand up! Fight back!”

I always found it especially jarring when it came to “disabled people.”

The first banner we made for disability organizing group DAMN (Disability Action Movement Now) — back in 2007 — said “You Don’t Have to Stand-Up to Fight Back.” The image was the disability icon of a wheelchair user modified to have their fist in the air. Beginning in the early 2000s, I and others began advocating in meetings for a change in this chant to “Unite! Fight back!” which is better politically because it calls for unity and it isn’t disablist. It took many years but, with the exception of fringe groups and the occasional setback, we killed the problematic chant.

I was surprised when I heard this chant in another city. “Oh, this is where we are at here,” I thought. The implicit (and explicit) disablism in social justice movements was what I was largely responding to when I started writing what became *Disability Politics and Theory*. The other part was the absence of meaningful radical politics and social justice in disability rights and disability studies. So much has changed since the first edition of this book came out in 2012 — and much more since I began writing for it in 2001. One of the lovely ways the world has changed since the first edition was released is that people are talking about disability much more. The nascent disability justice movement at the time of the first edition is now well known and widely supported. Yet there is still so far to go.

When I wrote the first edition, there was one book that engaged with disability through a radical analysis: Eli Clare's *Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness and Liberation*. There has been a flourishing of work since. This includes the emergence of mad studies: proposed by Richard Ingram at a conference in 2008 and beginning in earnest with edited collections, including Brenda LeFrançois, Robert Menzies and Geoffrey Reaume's (2013) *Mad Matters: A Critical Reader in Canadian Mad Studies* and Bonnie Burstow, Brenda LeFrançois and Shaindl Diamond's (2014) *Psychiatry Disrupted: Theorizing Resistance and Crafting the (R)Evolution*. These key anthologies began laying the ground for what is now a newly established (sub)field. Neurodiversity studies is also emerging (see, for example, den Houting 2018) and neurodiversity activism has made important gains and done great work. Deaf studies, with books like Harlan Lane, Robert Hoffmeister and Ben Bahan's *Journey into the Deaf World* (1996), and Deaf activism have long since established themselves and continue to thrive.

The Public Record and Setting It Straight

I was on a long waiting list to get into the gender clinic when my first book came out. Every trans person had to undergo an evaluation to determine if we were sufficiently trans to get the medical care we sought. In the trans community, there was an understanding that only certain stories were permissible — we had to fit into one of the few narratives that the experts deemed acceptable. If we didn't, we would not be deemed trans (enough) and would not be approved for publicly funded surgery. One could pursue surgery privately if they had the funds (and concealed their prior "gender failure"). It was safer, and much faster, for those with the privilege to do so to seek private surgery directly and not attempt to access the public system. I was on disability social assistance, so I took the only route available to me at the time: the draconian gender clinic. My story didn't fit one of the few permissible narratives for trans people. I was nonbinary and had been using singular "they" pronouns for about ten years by that point. So, I had to become a different story.

That is how my first book, *Disability Politics and Theory*, was both a project of pride and betrayal. The back cover — one that people from the gender clinic may have found online to check my story — calls me "he." Those two short letters are alien to me. They aren't just wrong; they are harmful to me. I chose to identify that way on the back cover under duress in order to access the medical care I desperately sought.

Gender identity disorder, which would soon be officially renamed gender dysphoria, is considered a mental disorder, a mental illness, a psychiatric

disability according to the American Psychiatric Association. The year following my top surgery, the American Psychiatric Association's new definition would make space for people like me. Overnight, with the release of the new *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders – 5*, nonbinary people could access gender-affirming surgeries and, not long later, general practitioners would be able to prescribe these surgeries — dramatically diminishing the power and control the gender clinic had over trans people's lives.

This story shows a lot of key themes of the book: my experience of disability was deeply informed by my lack of privilege; how disability, trans and class are relational; and medical experts controlled my access to resources. The definition of disability changed, coinciding with social attitudes about the group that was defined as disabled. Medicalization has had significant and lasting consequences on my life in multiple ways, and how I identified was nowhere near as important as how I was identified by experts. The record that I created because of the confines of the medical system has haunted me for over a decade.

Shifts and Changes in the Second Edition

With the help of the first edition of this book, which I wrote largely in my twenties, I got into grad school without an undergraduate degree. Since then, I have finished a PhD. I don't have the same succinctness or confidence that I did in years gone by. A strength of this is that I understand and grapple with a lot more complexity and nuance; a weakness is that I struggle to do so all briefly. While I put forward answers, I also continue to have questions. I am continuing to learn, and learning, especially as a white settler, is a lifelong process.

There are several key changes in this new edition. The most overt change is the addition of a new chapter on rehabilitation. This edition parcels the rehabilitation model away from the medical model. Because the rehabilitation model is derived from the medical model and operates with largely the same logics, in the previous edition I had discussed it briefly as part of the medical model. More recently, and largely through my research on social work's violent rehabilitative practices, I have come to appreciate the significance of this model in its own right.

In the first edition, my discussion of colonialism was removed in the editing process — as recommended by a reviewer. When things get removed that should be present, it's usually because of the author's inability to properly incorporate an idea into the text or to properly explain it. I understood colonialism to be a foundational issue, but I wasn't yet able to conceptualize disability

as it relates to colonialism and Indigeneity in meaningful and integrated ways. So, that discussion appeared to be an add on and was removed. Colonialism, then, was not given anywhere near the attention it should have been, as it was only ever discussed in relation to capitalism or other oppressions. In the years between editions, I have come to understand that disablement is not only the product of colonialism, but indeed the very concept of disability is a colonial imposition. I also corrected my failure to address the social obsession with individualism as a consequence of capitalism and disablism while neglecting the centrality of colonialism.

Shifting away from the Euro-American dualism that is part of the colonial project, I have moved away from using “body and mind” to *bodymind* (Price 2015; also see Clare 2017). The mind/body divide has been used to justify the oppression of women and Black people, Indigenous people and people of colour (BIPOC) through assertions that they have a “pure embodiment” and are, therefore, “unable to produce knowledge” (Schalk 2018: 6).

I also now understand systems and oppression differently. Oppression is relational — it is the interactions between people rather than a thing in itself. The same is true for capitalism, the state, and society — these are people doing things. When we think of these as things, we objectify what are the interactions of people (Bannerji 1995; Smith 1987). This way of thinking is helpful because it brings oppression and capitalism back from something *out there* — nearly impossible to reach, let alone defeat — to the interactions of people. So, I use the terms *social relations* rather than society and *capitalist relations* rather than capitalism. Nevertheless, when I do use words like *oppression, the state and capitalism*, I am still referencing the interactions of people.

This also refutes claims by folks like white, straight, cis bros that “it is all class” and “all we need to do is eliminate capitalism to end oppression.” It isn’t. We don’t. Ruby Hamad (2019) calls this “classwashing” (123).

Be wary of anything that claims “it’s all” one thing. I should have known better when I followed disability studies histories that claim “it’s all disability” when it comes to eugenics. It isn’t. One of my most significant sites of learning and a major motivation for this second edition has been in relation to my telling of the history of eugenics. The history of eugenics that is told within disability studies is part of what I would call the white supremacist school of disability studies. I was unaware that I was perpetuating this at the time, but I perpetuated it nonetheless. This is best illustrated by my uncritical adoption of a quote from Lennard Davis (1995) in which he claimed that categories of feeble-mindedness (“women, people of colour, homosexuals, the working class and so on”) “were considered to be categories of disability, although we do not think of them as connected in this way today” (14). This is not just

an oversimplified version of history; this collapsing of race into disability is a repeated pattern within white supremacist disability studies and the feeble-minded → disability myth is foundational within the field. This is “eugenics as alibi” (Gorman 2016: 251) and then has the “function of providing ... an alibi for the reproduction of race/class exploitation and oppression.” To borrow from Hamad, this is disabilitywashing. Consequently, middle- and upper-class white disabled people don’t have to be accountable for or engage with race and class because they incorporate these into disability through this specific telling of eugenic history. In this edition, I have worked to engage with the historical nuance of eugenics in relation to disability and race more accurately and adequately.

We Are on a Brink

It is a scary time.

I am writing at a time when the US has the highest rate of incarceration in the world, with over two million people currently in prison; Black people are incarcerated at nearly five times the rate of white people. In Canada, Indigenous people make up 5 percent of the overall population but 21 percent of the prison population; Black people make up 4 percent of the overall population but 8 percent of the prison population, while white people make up 69 percent of the overall population but 54 percent of those in prison. Israel has begun a campaign of collective punishment against the Palestinian people; over ten thousand civilians have been killed, many more injured and there is no end in sight as I do the final edits on this book. In Yemen, hundreds of people, impoverished and hungry after years of war, lined up in the capital to get donations from merchants that amounted to about US\$10; alarmed by gunfire and an explosion, a stampede broke out — leaving seventy-eight dead. That war has been fuelled by US and Canadian arms. Unhoused people have been criminalized in cities across North America (see CBC News 2023; Chandler 2020; McCarthy et al. 2023; Withers 2021). Parents of trans kids have been criminalized for allowing their kids to access gender-affirming care; over five hundred anti-2SLGBTQI+ bills were introduced into American legislatures in just the first six months of 2023; and trans people are being denied medical care (Choi and Mullery 2023).¹ Provincial governments in Canada have also started implementing anti-trans legislation (Martin 2023). Attacks on gender-nonconforming and trans communities are ramping up in Canada, with protests at drag storytimes and trans events. We continue to live in a global pandemic, one in which the isolation of immunocompromised people is deemed acceptable so normative people don’t have to endure the

inconvenience of mask wearing, one in which hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people have died because of inequities and injustices. Meanwhile, the Canadian government makes public shows of reconciliation while building pipelines across Indigenous land and violently removing protesters (Cecco 2019); it also fought in court for fifteen years to eschew human rights-based provision of court-ordered benefits to Indigenous children (Indigenous Services Canada 2017) and the Ontario government has tried to offset the costs of building colonial infrastructure to reduce treaty debts (Forester 2023). Two young Black lawmakers were thrown out of their elected positions in Tennessee and an elected trans woman has been prohibited from speaking — all for denouncing injustice. The Canadian state continues to use media exclusion zones to limit coverage of police activity — even though the courts have ruled it illegal. There is the ongoing and worsening global climate crisis — and it is people in the Global South (largely racialized, poor and disproportionately disabled people) and BIPOC and poor communities in the Global North that will feel, and have begun to feel, the worst of that crisis. The Global North is disproportionately responsible for this crisis and is in a strong position to remedy it, yet those with power continue to put their own short-term economic interests ahead of the survival of the planet. Things have never been good for members of oppressed groups. With the continued onslaught of neoliberalism and attacks on the appearance of democracy, things seem to be getting worse. Disability is woven into all these issues.

The world is on the brink. The only thing that has ever led to meaningful social change is when people take action. Disabled people must be part of that struggle. This book is for people to have a better vocabulary and framework for struggle. It is not about theory for the sake of it; it is about understanding so we can pull back from the brink. This book is for disabled people to find ourselves — to build understanding so we can win justice for all. It is for those people who live in the grey — the people who aren't sure if or if it is ok to say they are disabled. I am there with you. I am there because I support you, I will hold your hand (or stump or whatever). I am there on my own sometimes. It is okay to be in the grey. This book is also for nondisabled people to better understand how to work in solidarity, how to work accessibly, and to better appreciate that your struggle is tied to mine. This is our collective struggle, disabled and nondisabled — and people in the grey.

Note

1. 2SLGBTQI refers to Two Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans (which can be inclusive of nonbinary people), queer and intersex people. Two Spirit people are listed first because it is important to forefront the needs of Indigenous Peoples and decolonization given we live in a settler colony.