

## The Neoliberal Circulation of Affects:

Happiness, accessibility and the capacitation of disability as wheelchair

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## Abstract

The International Symbol of Access (ISA) produces, capacitates, and debilitates disability in particular ways and is grounded by a happy affective economy that is embedded within neoliberal capitalism. This production of disability runs counter to the dismantling of ableism and compulsory able-bodiedness. In charting the development of the modern wheelchair, the rise of disability rights in North America, and the emergence of the ISA as a universally acceptable representation of access for disabled people, I argue that this production of disability serves a capacitating function for particular forms of impairment. These capacitated forms are celebrated through a neoliberal economy of inclusion. I conclude by critically approaching the happy affects of the ISA, including the way in which the symbol creates a sense of cruel optimism for disabled people.

**Keywords:** *International Symbol of Access (ISA); disability; wheelchair; affect; neoliberalism*

## The Neoliberal Circulation of Affects:

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K. Fritsch

### I. The Appearance of Disability as Wheelchair

In this paper I argue that the International Symbol of Access (ISA) produces, capacitates, and debilitates disability in particular ways. This production of disability is grounded in a happy affective economy that is embedded within neoliberal capitalism and runs counter to the dismantling of ableism and compulsory able-bodiedness. Ableism, as outlined by Fiona Kumari Campbell (2009) is “a network of beliefs, processes and practices that produces a particular kind of self and body (the corporeal standard) that is projected as the perfect, species-typical and therefore essential and fully human” (p. 5). As Robert McRuer argues, compulsory able-bodiedness masquerades able-bodiedness as “a nonidentity, as the natural order of things” (2006, p. 1). Together, ableism and compulsory able-bodiedness cast disability as “a diminished state of being human” (Campbell, 2009, p. 5). The ISA is the most ubiquitous and prototypical representation of accessibility in Western societies: a white graphic depiction of a wheelchair user, faced to the right, presented on a blue background. In charting the development of the modern wheelchair, the rise of disability rights in North America, and the emergence of the ISA as a universally acceptable representation of access for disabled people, I argue that the ISA produces disability through a neoliberal, ableist logic, capacitating disability as an individualized problem that can be known and solved. To serve such a capacitating function, the ISA engages particular forms of impairment and disability that can be captured through a neoliberal economy of inclusion. By coming to know disability as an individualized problem and by having the ISA adorn a bus or a building, the uncomfortable problem and unease of the difference of disability appears to be taken care of. That is, the ISA as a symbol of inclusion and accommodation allows disability to appear in order to disappear.

By appearing and appearing to have been taken care of, the difference and uncomfortableness of disability disappears. In this way, the ISA produces happy feelings and such happy feelings circulate with ease, reproducing the capacitation of particular productions of disability and leading to the limited inclusion of capacitated forms of disability within neoliberal economies. Thus, this paper explores the ways in which the ISA produces an exclusionary form of inclusion, allowing for the production of the “able-disabled” (Titchkosky, 2003) while other debilitated disabled people face “slow death” (Berlant, 2007). In this way, through the ISA, disability both appears so as to be included in neoliberal economies and disappears by way of slow death. I conclude by critically approaching the happy affects of the ISA, including the way in which the symbol creates a sense of “cruel optimism” (Berlant, 2013) for disabled people. In engaging the investment of happy feelings disabled people have towards the ISA, I trouble the ease by which certain forms of disability are capacitated. In this way, my paper not only critically approaches how the ISA produces disability through ableism and compulsory able-bodiedness, but

also draws attention to the ways in which disabled people are invested in the neoliberal economy of happy affects that can impede disabled liberation.

Two experiences I had with accessible transit situate my concerns. In 2011, I attempted to take a bus operated by a regional public transportation company to a small town outside of Toronto. This transportation company offers accessible service to disabled people on both its trains and buses. I have used its trains many times but I had never used its bus service. There was a bus that ran semi-frequently to the town I wanted to get to. But, as I discovered upon arriving at the bus station, the bus *is* accessible but *only* for wheelchair users, and, I should add, probably only *some* wheelchair users.

While my status as a “walkie” (Clare, 2001, p. 359) fluctuates, I am not currently a wheelchair user. My predicament was that I could not climb the steep steps of the bus, but the lift that the bus was equipped with could only be used if I was seated and secured in a wheelchair. As a result of the policy surrounding how the bus lift may and may not be used, I was unable to board this *accessible* bus. I found myself in a position of being both disabled and not disabled enough, or not disabled in the right way. When I pointed out this contradiction to the bus driver, he shrugged his shoulders and commented: “Why don’t you just get a wheelchair if you can’t climb stairs?” Feeling defeated, I went home.

Later that same year, my partner and I took a trip out of town with our tandem bike by way of the train operated by the same regional public transportation company. I consider the tandem bike to be a mobility device in that it allows me to travel far distances without too much effort (since, as my partner often likes to remind me, he does most of the peddling). The train has one accessible car that you can walk or roll right onto while the other cars are accessed by raised stairs. However, what we didn’t know is that bikes are not allowed on this accessible car. We were thus left with the predicament of what to do since I needed to get on the accessible car, but my mobility device, as it were, was not allowed on. “Wheelchairs!” the train worker shouted at me. “This train car is for wheelchairs!” What he didn’t say was that able-bodied people frequently use the “wheelchair car” when travelling with strollers, luggage, or other cumbersome items that make it difficult to navigate the other train cars. It also didn’t seem to matter to the worker that it was a Sunday afternoon and that the accessible train car was empty. “No bikes allowed,” he said, pointing to the blue and white icon of the wheelchair mounted on the train walls. A bike is not a wheelchair, and thus a bike is not an acceptable form of mobility device, even when used by a disabled person. In the end, I rode in the accessible car while my partner and bike rode in another car. These events, along with other stories,<sup>1</sup> have

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<sup>1</sup> After delivering a version of this paper in June 2013 at the *Society for Disability Studies* conference, a number of people told me about the ways in which their disabled bodies were compelled to “become wheelchair” or alternatively were expelled from disability accommodations because they did not “fit” the register of being disabled. Included in these stories were ways in which wheelchair users themselves denied other disabled people access to elevators or washroom stalls because “they did not look disabled.” In all these accounts, disability and accessibility were intimately tied to the wheelchair. In another story, an able-bodied professor was expelled from an academic lecture because he attempted to place a standard chair in the open space designated for a wheelchair user: the lecture hall was at full capacity and there were no wheelchair users in attendance. In terms of room capacity, his body counted as the body of a wheelchair user but as he was not using a wheelchair, there was nowhere to sit. When security escorted the professor out of the lecture hall, he was informed that another chair could not be placed in the designed wheelchair spot, even if there were no wheelchair users in the room. The question thus arises: what would have happened if a disabled person with crutches, a cane, or some form of a visible or invisible impairment tried to sit in the wheelchair spot using a chair from another classroom?

pushed me to consider the ways in which the wheelchair, as the symbol of accessibility, came to produce and capacitate certain forms disability, while at the same time, decapacitating and curtailing other forms of disability.

The ISA, as one of the most ubiquitous and prototypical representations of disability in Western societies appears everywhere from doors, elevators, and parking spots to placards, t-shirts, and pamphlets. Approved and promoted globally in 1969 at the 11th World Congress of Rehabilitation International, an international non-governmental organization, the ISA is recognized and used internationally as the official symbol to identify facilities accessible to disabled people (Groce, 2002). In 1984, the International Organization of Symbols (ISO) registered the ISA as ISO Standard 7001 for public information symbols, and thus, protected the copyright, style, shape, and proportion of the symbol. According to Rehabilitation International, through its widespread use, the ISA has enabled disabled people to locate, identify, and use accessible facilities and has also “created a more general awareness of the problems of accessibility faced by disabled persons” (Rehabilitation International, 1978). The ISA, in other words, directs individuals to accessible locations, informs people about the availability of an accessible facility or service, and raises general awareness about disability and accessibility by symbolizing disability (Fritsch, 2013).

When opening their design competition for what was to become the ISA, Rehabilitation International asserted that the designed symbol must be self-descriptive, simple and aesthetic, practical, identifiable from a reasonable distance, and have no secondary meaning (Groce, 2002; Powell & Ben-Moshe, 2009). Remarkably, all submitted entries to the international competition were graphic representations of wheelchairs or wheelchair users (Groce, 2002), which as Justin Powell and Liat Ben-Moshe (2009, p. 91-92) note, indicates the power that wheelchair users had in shaping conceptions of access. Susanne Koefoed, a Danish graphic design student, won the competition with her design of a white outline of a wheelchair within a black square (Groce, 2002). After further discussion, Rehabilitation International’s committee changed the design by adding a head to the wheelchair icon and placing it on a blue background (Groce, 2002).

The ISA as a ubiquitous and prototypical symbol produces both individual and institutional understandings of disability. Focusing on whether or not the ISA is an accurate representation of disability – and thus inquiring into the truth of this symbol – is to focus on what disability is and is not, and thus reifies disability and able-bodiedness. I am not interested in whether or not the wheelchair adequately represents disability. Instead, building on the work of Tanya Titchkosky (2011), I am more interested in how the ISA produces, capacitates and debilitates certain forms of disability within contemporary neoliberal conditions. That is, I am interested in both what the ISA *does* and *how* this symbol does it in relation to both capitalism and through the circulation of happy affects. To get to this point, however, I turn briefly to the history of the modern wheelchair and the rise of disability rights in North America.

## II. Doing Disability as Wheelchair

In the history of disability in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the modern, self-propelled wheelchair is entangled with the development of post-war capitalism. The first semi-portable folding wheelchair, developed in 1933 by Everest and Jennings, was made out of lightweight metal aircraft tubing, and weighed fifty pounds (Shapiro, 1993; Tremblay, 1996). Canadian Lieutenant John Counsell, a combat-injured paraplegic from an upper class family, used his personal resources to acquire an Everest and Jennings chair so that he could independently navigate the streets of Toronto (Gerber, 2003, p. 908). Shortly after acquiring this chair, Counsell used both his social connections and the support of several influential doctors involved in spinal cord injury-care in Toronto to lobby the Canadian Department of Veteran Affairs to provide Everest and Jennings chairs to all paralyzed veterans (Gerber, 2003, p. 909). While sales were poor during World War II for Everest and Jennings, in 1945 the Canadian government made the first large order purchase of over 200 wheelchairs to provide to war veterans (Tremblay, 1996, p. 156; Gerber, 2003, p. 909). While at once a story of a concerned government looking out for its veterans, the arrangement was

also cost effective. The Canadian government agreed to purchase these newly designed wheelchairs for veterans so as to enable the veterans to get out of hospitals and long-term care institutions and enter the labour force. As Canadian historian Mary Tremblay remarks, the veterans “demonstrated that once educated appropriately they could compete successfully in professions, business, specialized trades, and live in their own homes. Thus, they demonstrated that as tax payers they more than returned to government coffers the costs of outlay for rehabilitation” (1996, p. 164). Access to wheelchairs led to a dramatic increase in the everyday presence of disabled veterans in public, thus making disability – at least for those disabled by war – more publicly visible (Sapey, Stewart, & Donaldson, 2005). This shift in government policy to get veterans out of hospitals and long-term care institutions by providing personal wheelchairs led to a noticeable increase in the development and production of wheelchairs and related accessories, bolstering the economy.

Such a growth in the public presence of disabled veterans restoring their independent lives through rehabilitative practices and new technology was a crucial component of post-war national projects of rebuilding hope and happiness, and a way of overcoming, if not forgetting, the suffering and catastrophes of war (Stiker, 1999; James, 2011; Fritsch, 2013). Disabled veterans were profoundly valorized (Gerber, 2003, p. 899) and emphasis was placed on “individual men pursuing the existing opportunities for entering the mainstream” in order “to compete with able-bodied workers on the majority’s terms” (p. 909). As such, the wheelchair was a tool of aggressive normalization even as it simultaneously marked the individual as different. Henri-Jacques Stiker, in his *A History of Disability* (1999), notes the ways in which the practice of rehabilitation arose as a way to turn the injured body into an “object of repair” (p. 124), a body that could be restored, redeemed and normalized, “making alterity disappear” (p. 131). The use of the wheelchair by veterans to access mainstream employment opportunities “on the majority’s terms” integrated and normalized disability. However, this normalization was only made possible by “making alterity disappear,” that is, both by marking the individual as different, and by ensuring that the difference of disability appeared only in order to disappear.

It was not just Canadian veterans who were given wheelchairs. In both the United States and Europe there was considerable positive political will “to find technical solutions to the problems of impairment generated by the violence of World War II” (Woods & Watson, 2003a, p. 166). While the impaired veterans of the Vietnam War in the 1960s and 1970s prompted that continued research into technical solutions, the polio epidemics of the late 1940s and early 1950s, and the impairments caused by thalidomide in the 1960s all further “generated engineering research and development into assistive devices” (p. 166). As welfare state economies boomed, equipment for the disabled began to be provided for all citizens rather than just to veterans. The Paralyzed Veterans of America and the Invalid Tricycle Association in Britain struggled to gain access to employment for its members, create accessible public transportation systems, and modify public buildings for increased accessibility. These efforts impacted innovations to wheelchair design and use. In the 1950s, the Canadian Department of Veteran Affairs worked with the National Research Council to develop an electric drive that would fit the standard Everest and Jennings wheelchair. The result was the 1953 Klein Chair, the technology of which Veteran Affairs made freely available in 1955. While the gesture was promoted as “a symbolic gesture of sharing technology for the greater good” (p. 167), Canadian firms were not interested in mass-producing the Klein chair because they deemed the demand too low (p. 167). Nonetheless, in 1956, Everest and Jennings and the American Wheel Chair Co. each introduced electric wheelchairs to the general public.

In utilizing wartime technology and providing for the rehabilitation and integration of disabled veterans into the labour force, the development, availability, and visibility of the wheelchair was directly tied to welfare state capitalism. Additionally, the emphasis placed on hope, of overcoming the ravages of war, and of reintegrating into society those visibly different, shows the ways in which the wheelchair is intimately tied to war and a part of a

politics of happiness caught up in a capitalist economy of rehabilitation.

The connection between wheelchair development, war veterans and the welfare state is not the usual story of the wheelchair within disability circles. Rather, the more common story leaves out this history of the manual wheelchair and starts with the electric wheelchair and how it led directly to the rise of disability rights. Brian Woods and Nick Watson (2003a; 2003b) argue that the electric wheelchair was central to the rise of the disability rights movement and key to the emergence of the 1970 Physically Disabled Student's Program (PDSP) in Berkeley, California, the precursor to the Independent Living Movement. With the advent of electric wheelchairs, disabled students who were unable to push themselves in a manual chair were able to leave their homes and institutions. This independence changed the way that these students viewed themselves but also changed their interaction with the outside world (Woods & Watson, 2003b). For example, the Rolling Quads, a group of radical disabled students, used their electric wheelchairs to occupy space and demonstrate against the lack of services provided by the California State Department of Vocational Rehabilitation. The success of these demonstrations eventually led to the founding of PDSP, an organization run for and by disabled people that provided personal assistants, repaired wheelchairs and aided disabled students in accessing funding.

In doing wheelchair repairs, members of the PDSP became specialists in understanding the design limitations of wheelchairs available on the market. Alongside veteran associations, members of the PDSP became actively involved in advocating for better wheelchair technology (Watson & Woods, 2003b, p. 7-9). In 1972, the Independent Living Movement grew out of the PDSP when community members started requesting assistance with accessing funding, acquiring personal assistants and accessing wheelchair repairs. At the same time, between the growing use of powered wheelchairs and the rise of the PDSP, the social meaning of wheelchairs also shifted away from rehabilitative and medical modes that provided disabled bodies "opportunities for entering the mainstream" (Gerber, 2003, p. 909). Rather, the wheelchair became a political instrument in the fight for independent living, the development of disability rights, and a means by which to change the mainstream. Thus, the electric wheelchair both shaped, and was shaped by, the social conditions in which it arose.

Despite the development of the electric wheelchair and its attachment to notions of independence, the manual wheelchair was hardly obsolete. In the early 1980s, the lightweight Quickie replaced the standard manual Everest and Jennings as the chair of choice for wheelchair users. In 1978, Marilyn Hamilton, who became paraplegic after a hang gliding accident, invented the Quickie wheelchair out of aluminum tubing used for hang gliders with the help of her fellow glider pilots, Don Helman and Jim Okamoto (Shapiro, 1993, p. 211-212). Their design weighed 26 pounds, half as much as an Everest and Jennings chair. As Joseph Shapiro writes, Hamilton "took a piece of medical equipment and made it fun and sporty. She took the universal symbol of sickness and turned it into the symbol of disability self-pride" (p. 213). After a folding version hit the market in 1984, Sunrise Medical bought out Quickie. By 1994, Quickie was a \$40-million-a-year business (p. 214). Everest and Jennings failed to anticipate the demand for such a sporty and portable wheelchair, and as result they "missed the rise of a newly independent generation of wheelchair users who, with new jobs and less dependent on welfare, were emerging as a powerful consumer group" (p. 216).

With the visibility of wheelchair using veterans, students, and others who "were emerging as a powerful consumer group," it is of little surprise, then, that the wheelchair came to mind for those entering Rehabilitation International's design competition, let alone that Rehabilitation International chose the wheelchair as the winning submission. As Titchkosky (2011, p. 55) remarks, "Imagining disability is, more often than not, imagining wheelchair use." Wheelchair users had managed to make themselves publicly visible and politically important in ways that other forms of disability had not. However, while the modern wheelchair made veterans visible within the auspices of the welfare state, the electric wheelchair at the heart of disability rights and the independent living movement emerged alongside the beginning of the neoliberal challenge to, and dismantling of, the welfare state.

While veterans called for the state to intervene, discourses of independence and disability rights arose alongside broader political policies of deregulation, privatization, individualization, and, as Wendy Brown (2005, p. 40) notes, the dissemination of market values and market rationality to all institutions and social actions. That is, the independent living movement gained momentum as the state abdicated responsibility for funding unionized positions in nursing homes and other institutions while it trumpeted the cost-effectiveness of using flexible labourers as personal attendants. The deregulation of the workplace brought significant changes to care providers' safety and rights while the state and businesses promoted public-private partnerships in mental health, rehabilitative services, and various forms of outpatient community-based services. As a result of these measures, state responsibilities have been downloaded onto local municipalities, non-governmental organizations, grassroots organizations and charities, or individual families, as disabled people become entrepreneurs and employers. As major corporations have received government subsidies to employ disabled people, those same corporations have been involved in displacing disabled people by razing low-income housing to redevelop and gentrify poor neighbourhoods. The ISA appears on the front doors of multinational banks and homeless shelters alike. Along with disability rights and the independent living movement, the ISA was created and continues to work within the neoliberalization of the economy. This has implications for how the ISA produces, capacitates, and debilitates disability, and leaves disability politics vulnerable to being captured by neoliberal capitalism.

### III. The ISA *Does* Disability

In depicting the wheelchair as the symbol of access, a mobility-impaired person who uses a wheelchair comes to symbolize all other forms of disability (Fritsch, 2013). Conceptualized in this way, disability pertains only to a “young man in a wheelchair who is fit, never ill, and whose only need is a physically accessible environment” (Morris 2001, 9). This internationally-recognized, allegedly universal symbol, in other words, comes to produce disability as a physical impairment that requires a wheelchair, while sidelining and erasing other forms of impairment and disability, and the various needs of a disabled person (Fritsch, 2013). Drawing on Butler's (1993) theory of the performativity of language, the ISA can be considered as enacting or producing what accessibility and inaccessibility are. The ISA also constitutes disability such that it is impossible to conceive of disability without thinking of someone needing special access. In this sense, the ISA produces that which it names (Butler, 1999). If accessibility and disability are to be denoted by a figuration of the wheelchair, then the ISA produces disability as requiring wheelchair things like ramps, elevators, and large bathroom stalls.

Because the ISA is considered “self descriptive” with “no secondary meaning,” (Rehabilitation International, 2013) it constitutes disability in such a way that allows for taken-for-granted conceptions of who has an access issue and what access means to prevail, and these prevailing conceptions influence how people perceive these issues and act upon them (Titchkosky, 2011). As Ben-Moshe and Powell (2007) argue, the ISA attempts to create clear boundaries between who is considered disabled and who is considered abled-bodied in which some bodies are just disabled and others are not. This constructed binary “belies the relational context-dependent aspect of disablement” (p. 495). The ISA, as a static image, does not show the fluid, context-dependent nature of disability and impairment that changes over the course of one's life. Nor can the static character of the symbol account for the ways that developments in cybernetics, pharmaceutical therapies, prosthetic enhancements, and other medical or technological interventions have already radically altered what bodies can do and will continue to do in years ahead (Fritsch, 2013).

By designating spaces that are accessible in contrast to inaccessible spaces, the ISA positions disability as something apart from normative embodiment. Such a division of space flies in the face of universal design or



notions of collective access (Hamraie, 2013; Mingus, 2010), and reinforces the divide between non-disabled and disabled that again reinforces a static, reified understanding of disability. In creating separate spaces, the ISA naturalizes able-bodies as not requiring “access,” and ignores the ways in which most people may only ever be “momentarily able-bodied” (Zola, 1982, p. 242) and thus have bodies that are always moving between modes of capacity. By naturalizing disability as an inherent and static mode of being, the ISA also obfuscates the ways in which disability appears through the construction of space (Gleeson, 1998; Freund, 2001; Dolmage, 2012; Himraie, 2013). The ISA relies upon creating an exclusionary space. As Titchkosky (2011, p. 61) argues: “Every universal access sign suggests that access is available only in particular locations. If access were widely available, signs of access would not be necessary.” Furthermore, she contends:

Disability is a key way of constitutively perceiving non-normalcy; it is a way of referring to and dealing with that which is regarded as anomalous and is almost always devalued. This means that the concept of disability gives us access to certain people, places, and events, but it does so while shoring up a belief in a naturalized version of access: one either has access or does not; one personally needs access or does not. Through unexamined relations to both disability and non-disability, the idea that the world is ‘naturally’ for some and not for others is reproduced. A failure to attend to the ways the world is naturalized, and thus to appear ‘naturally’ there only for some, is the basic premise of the social processes of able-ism, patriarchy, and colonialism. (p. 6)

The ISA naturalizes access as being needed for some and not others. Thus, the ISA naturalizes disability as an individualized access problem, separate from normative embodiment.

In addition, the ISA produces disability through directing and orienting bodies in certain ways. Titchkosky comments, “We typically read signs as indicators, as giving information, as directing us to the required and the expected. Signs, in other words, are a form of orientation” (2011, p. 65). In *Queer Phenomenology*, Sara Ahmed (2007) argues that bodies get directed in some ways more than others. The ISA orients some bodies to be turned toward certain wheelchair objects - ramps, elevators, larger bathroom stalls, etc., and in doing so orients other bodies away from these objects. Ahmed remarks: “The direction we take excludes things for us, before we even get there” (p. 15). Again, through directing us towards accessible spaces, the ISA produces disability as being about some bodies and not others, and about some objects and not others. Hence, the ISA creates disability as an individualized problem that can be solved by particular accommodations rather than disability being a welcomed and diverse form of embodied difference. The ISA sets up disability as turned toward certain objects that reaffirm those objects as “disability-things” (Smit, 2013). Reaffirming that some directions and objects are “disability things” gestures toward a whole network of “taken-for-granted background expectations” (Titchkosky, 2011, p. 65) that produce disability in particular ways.

The ISA also produces disability through its appearance after a retrofit has been done. For Jay Dolmage (2012; 2013), the retrofit, an addition or alteration to something that has already been built, is part of the logic of neoliberalism. Disability is accommodated by adding ramps onto the side of a building or around the back, instead of at the main entrance, relegating disability as a form of difference “supplemental to society” (Dolmage, 2013, p. 1). Disability is included as an afterthought; welcome, but only by way of the side entrance. The ISA often appears after a retrofit has been done, allowing disability to appear only to orient disability to disappear through the side entrance. The retrofit offers a quick and temporary fix through cheap additions or alterations rather than designing with disability as a routine part of spatial organization. While capitalism has produced inaccessible geographies (Gleeson, 1998) and thus excluded disabled people, the retrofit acts as a bandage solution, a charitable form of inclusion without changing too much. The retrofit shows the ineffectiveness of capitalism to contend with crises of its own making, even as capitalism constantly adapts (Dolmage, 2013).

At the same time, the ISA produces disability by disguising the way disability is capacitated and debilitated within a neoliberal capitalist economy. Much like the overcoming and forgetting of suffering associated with the rehabilitating war veterans (Stiker, 1999; Fritsch, 2013), the ISA covers over the ways in which disability is incurred by capitalist social relations whether by way of poverty, war, austerity measures, environmental destruction, or other debilitating processes (Sothorn, 2007; Erevelles, 2011; McRuer, 2012; Chandler, 2013). By making disability appear to be an individualized problem, or as Alison Kafer puts it, “casting disability as a monolithic fact of the body” (2013, p.3), the ISA makes its innocuous appearance on buildings, buses and bathroom stalls without so much of a hint of the ways in which disability often comes to appear by way of a lack of access to adequate health care, an exploding land mine, a revoking of social benefits, a loss of labour rights, or dirty water.

In sum, the ISA produces disability as a static thing rather than marking disability as a fluid, contextual, social relation. As a thing, disability can be known, contained, marketed, consumed, profited from, and solutions can be found. Inclusion can be celebrated, as if accessibility were simply about arriving at the side entrance. In thing form, disability can be capacitated by neoliberal practices of inclusion: that is, one can be included if one can be captured by market rationality, or market values. Bodies that are profitable, that can be marketed to, can be enhanced, or incorporated into the labour force, are bodies that neoliberalism deems worthy. These “able-disabled” (Titchkosky, 2003) bodies are included because they can be predictably productive under neoliberalism and as such are rewarded and trumpeted as evidence of an inclusive society. These bodies are entrepreneurs and have the capacity for “self-care” or “the ability to provide for their own needs and service their own ambitions” (Brown, 2005, p. 42). Those bodies that do not fit within the static thingness of disability as produced by the ISA, or cannot be capacitated in such a way as to participate in the labour force, are debilitated or rendered for “slow death” or “death as a way of life” (Berlant, 2007, p. 776). For Lauren Berlant (2007), slow death “refers to the physical wearing out of a population and the deterioration of people in that population that is very nearly a defining condition of their experience and historical existence” (p. 754). This rendering does not place these people outside of capitalism because “slow death” is, as Jasbir Puar (2012) points out, also profitable.

Puar (2012) argues that all bodies in neoliberal capitalism are “being evaluated in relation to their success or failure in terms of health, wealth, progressive productivity, upward mobility, [and] enhanced capacity” (p. 155). Puar contends that given biopolitical developments in neoliberal capitalism, a shift has occurred such that the focus is on the differential capacitation of all bodies and not simply their normalization. That is, through capacitating processes like genetic therapies, surgeries, supplements, prosthetic enhancements, and healthism, bodies are to be capacitated beyond what is thought of as the able-body. Drawing on Donna Haraway (1997), Matthew Sothorn (2007) notes that in the context of the promise of technoscientific solutions, “disability occupies a privileged position” (p. 146). That is, disability “is the category that neoliberal figurations of biomedicine promise to eliminate even while neoliberalism invests in the proliferation of categories of disability” (p. 146). While the policies of neoliberalism promise that our active, self-cared-for-selves will avoid illness and disability through the wonders of technoscience, “there is the simultaneous pharmaceutical-industrial production of increasingly complex and expanding categories of disability that can be medicated or otherwise manipulated for profit” (p. 146). Kafer comments on this technoscientific tension stating: “The same technology that enables a paraplegic to walk allows a soldier to kill more efficiently and ergonomically” (2013, p. 121). Further, as Steven Kurzman reflects: “I stand and walk with the irony that the materials and design of my leg are based in the same military technology which has blown the limbs off so many other young men” (quoted in Kafer, 2013, p. 121). According to Puar, neoliberalism mobilizes the tension between capacity and debility in order to profit from both the debilitation of certain bodies but also profit from the ways in which people recover or overcome debility through processes of capacitation (2012, p. 154). An economics of both debility and capacity serves the interests of neoliberal capital and reshapes formations

of disability.

Thus, through neoliberalism, those who are “upwardly mobile” become not only the able-disabled, but also entrepreneurs, employers of attendants, consumers of therapies, supplements, and enhancements. Neoliberalism, by way of the retrofit of the economy, orients and capacitates those disabled who can afford to be included. Disability is privatized, individualized, entangled in deregulation, and profoundly affected by austerity measures. It is for this reason that Sothorn concludes: “the space of the disabled body must also be thought of as a space of the contradictions of neoliberalism – it is at once privileged as a site of inclusion, but that inclusion is also the promise of its exclusion” (2007, p. 146).

Even recent “progressive” attempts to redesign the ISA cannot fully escape the capturing of disability as an individualized problem within neoliberalism. For example, the US-based Accessible Icon Project (2013) has redesigned the ISA to be a more active symbol, emphasizing an independent wheelchair user in motion. Their redesign focuses on the mobility of the person using the wheelchair, in contrast to the immobile, static, and passive wheelchair user of the traditional ISA. By focusing on the abilities of the wheelchair user, by emphasizing the motion of the individual, by situating the person as the “‘driver’ or decision maker” (Accessible Icon Project, 2013), the redesign seeks to “suggest the dynamic mobility of a chair user” and represent the user’s “active status of navigating the world” (Accessible Icon Project, 2013). The wheelchair user is recapacitated as an active agent. The redesign of the ISA reinscribes person-first politics that individualize disability in that they seek to make the person, not the chair, important and visible. The person-first approach posits that people are more than their disabilities and it is important to see the person, emphasizing the human beyond the (presumed inhuman) disability. However, separating the person from disability places disability as a medical or biological problem existing in addition to the individual, rather than conceiving of disability and impairment as being produced historically through social relations. The Accessible Icon Project has flourished throughout the United States, and the new mobile icon has replaced the ISA in cities like Austin, El Paso, New York City and Boston. The Project has recently paired up with corporate sponsors such as Clarke’s and The Talbots Inc., in addition a slew of other partners like The Bronx Zoo (Accessible Icon Project, 2013). Corporate partners like these know the financial potential both of disability as “fun and sporty” and of disability in motion. Their new mobile wheelchair user does not need the welfare state to push her wheelchair. Rather, this upwardly mobile subject wheels herself to wherever neoliberal capitalism will take her.

The ISA opens up possibilities to pay attention to and capacitate disability in particular ways, while excluding others. Titchkosky asks if we might come to know disability differently by critically addressing how it is we have come to know disability with certainty (2011, p. 16). To this, I wonder if we might come to know disability differently by confronting the happy, affective feelings that circulate around disability and the ISA.

#### IV. The Happy Disappearance of Disability

Indebted to the work of Henri- Bergson, Baruch Spinoza, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, affect can be conceptualized as pre-individual forces that augment or diminish a body’s capacity to act, engage, or connect. For Ahmed (2010), happiness involves affects in order for the objects of happiness to become social goods. That is, she argues that feelings do not reside within individual subjects and then move outwards towards particular objects but rather, she contends, objects create impressions through feelings (p. 14). To feel happiness “is to recognize that happiness starts from somewhere other than the subject who may use the word to describe a situation” (p. 21). And, as Ahmed continues, “If happiness creates its objects, then such objects are passed around, accumulating positive affective value as social goods” (p. 21). Through the production of happiness, objects become social goods that have positive affective qualities. “To be affected ‘in a good way’ thus involves an orientation to something as being good” (p. 24).

Happiness is an affective economy that allows us to have contact with good objects. Since “we move toward and away from objects through how we are affected by them” (p. 24), happiness orients what objects we come into contact with. That objects are considered happy or are considered the cause of happiness “means they already circulate as social goods before we ‘happen’ upon them, which is why we might happen upon them in the first place” (p. 28). That is to say, the objects we encounter are never neutral. In order to happen upon an object, its affective value is already in place; the object is already invested with positive and negative value (p. 34). As happiness is a shared orientation toward what is good (p. 56), going along “with happiness scripts” is a way of getting along; “to get along is to be willing and able to express happiness in proximity to the right things” (p. 59).

The ISA is a site of affective happiness within neoliberalism and functions in such a way as to hamper the conditions necessary to dismantle ableism and compulsory able-bodiedness. In what follows, I trace the ways in which the production of disability has been built upon positive affects, and in turn, how the ISA is imbued with happy affects that capacitate certain forms of disability inclusion. I conclude by considering the cruel optimism of the ISA and the role of the transfigured crip to come.

The contemporary production of disability has been built on positive affects. The circulation of positive affects in the production of disability does not replace other modes of producing disability, but rather is layered within them. This is to say, the ways in which disability is produced through tragedy, pity, or disgust, are all tangled up with positive affects; all these forms of producing disability work together and re-enforce one another. From the demand to overcome shame and embody pride (Kolarova, 2012), to the medically driven imperative to overcome suffering and embody an expression of hope (Fritsch, 2013), the disabled have been positioned as the inspiring crip, the ones who will be cured through positive thinking, and as an individualized problem that is solvable. Disability is caught up in the ableist turn towards healthism and the imperative for everyone to have intensively enhanced bodies. From the oft-cited “Jerry’s Kids,” to culturally ubiquitous inspirational quotes that mark disability as something to conquer, happy affects of cure, overcoming, and progress are embedded in dominant conceptions of disability. Happy affects drive what Robert McRuer (2006) has termed “compulsory able-bodiedness,” not only because people are invested in the “happiness scripts” of biological cures, narratives of overcoming, and the allure of technological advances, but because compulsory able-bodiedness is always, already, a social good in neoliberal capitalism. As such, the happy affects circulating by way of pride, hope, cure, or progress, end up retrofitting disability as “a vector of neoliberal governance” (Kolarova, 2012, p. 268).

Disability as thing, or disability as contained by the International Symbol of Access is not only knowable and profitable, but it is also the site of happy affects. By having the wheelchair symbol adorn a bus or a building, the problem and uncomfortableness of the difference of disability appears to be taken care of. With the appearance of the ISA, happy affects of having “done our duty for the disabled” circulate, even in the face of contested understandings of disability or accessibility.

For example, Titchkosky (2011) writes of her struggle to make her university workplace more accessible. She observes that in July 2006, the twelve-story university building in which she worked at the University of Toronto had no washrooms that met provincial minimal disability accessibility standards (p. 71). She notes how the ISA appeared on five bathroom doors that were entirely inaccessible. Titchkosky found from her colleagues and staff working in the building that the signs were posted “some twenty years ago” when the building was retrofitted to include a ramp to the front entrance of the building. When Titchkosky pointed out the inappropriate posting of the ISA signs on places like inaccessible washroom doors, users of the building commented, “How were we to know any better?” (p. 75). Others questioned Titchkosky’s interest in the inappropriate signs, remarking “Isn’t something better than nothing?” And further stated, “If they can’t use the washrooms *what are they doing* here anyway?” (p. 75). Here, the positive circulation of affects happens through the disavowal of ableism and compulsory able-

bodiedness. That is, the comment “something is better than nothing” suggests that disabled people should be happy with what they have, even if it is entirely inappropriate. The ISA is a marker of accessibility and inclusion, even when it fails. For good feelings to continue with ease, it is important for no one to get upset by the inappropriate signs. If someone does get upset, the response is to question why disabled people are appearing in these inaccessible spaces. Clearly, this space is not intended for them and was never intended to be for them, even if the sign of inclusion promises otherwise. To suggest that “something is better than nothing” or to be baffled that a disabled person would appear in a space that has no accessible bathrooms exemplifies the retrofitted nature of neoliberal approaches to disability. It is also representative of the ways in which disability is located in particular bodies and is not considered to be a difference we are all implicated in (re)producing.

When Titchkosky began making inquiries into the possibilities for renovating washrooms to make them accessible, administrators concluded that there was no reason to renovate, as accessible washrooms already existed in the building. Incredulously they asked her if she had not seen the wheelchair symbol adorn on the doors to the washrooms? Of this struggle, Titchkosky comments: “it was difficult for people to know that they were living without an accessible washroom because there were signs that said otherwise” (p. 84). And yet, Titchkosky observes: “People who worked and were educated in this building witnessed wheelchair users getting stuck while attempting to enter the main-floor washrooms since there was a wall that immediately confronted whoever pushed open the door” (p. 84). That disability appears to be taken care of is a good feeling and such good feelings circulate with ease, even when someone is confronted with a contradictory reality.

With the ISA, disability appears in order to disappear, is included to be excluded. The deployment of the ISA solves the problem of disability without ever needing to include disabled people or without ever needing to confront the contradictions of accessibility as it reduces “the lived complexity” of disabled embodiment “into a caricature – literally, disability-diversity becomes a stick figure” (Titchkosky, 2011, p. 81). Disability becomes a thing that is contained and known; a stick figure in a blue box. In being known, disability can be taken care of by building ramps or, more importantly, simply by posting the ISA. That disability is taken care of is a good feeling. In this good feeling, ableism and compulsory able-bodiedness are covered over by happy affects. It is only when someone gets upset that these happy affects are disrupted. In these moments disability becomes a problem again. However, the problem is not ableism but the uncomfortable presence of the debilitated crip. As a problem, the upset debilitated crip becomes the individual killjoy that disturbs “the very fantasy that happiness can be found in certain places” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 66) by interrupting the ease by which happy affects circulate.

For the ISA to be posted, disability must already be depoliticized and desocialized in particular ways. The inclusion of disability is done through a conditional embrace of difference: through accommodating the wheelchair, through compliance with neoliberal forms of capacitation, and through discrediting the killjoy as the debilitated “benefit scrounging scum” (McRuer, 2012). By capacitating certain forms of disability and inclusion, this conditional embrace of difference separates out who can have a livable life and who is marked for social death. Caught up in happy affects of disability, this economy of inclusion works toward particular forms of normalization (Kolarove, 2011; Titchkosky, 2003), and also, as Puar (2012) and Sothorn (2007) suggest, through a neoliberal ableist project of continuous bodily enhancement.

Disabled people themselves also participate in the happy affects of the ISA. If the ISA offers able-bodied people the good feelings of being part of the solution, the ISA also contains within it the promise of an accessible path, an accessible future, a place and space for disabled people. This hope and happiness contained within and expressed through the ISA is what Lauren Berlant (2010) calls “cruel optimism.” For Berlant, a “relation of cruel optimism is a double-bind in which your attachment to an object sustains you in life at the same time as that object is actually a threat to your flourishing” (Berlant & Seitz, 2013).

Cruel optimism is a politics of deferral for disability. By making hope and happiness that which the ISA can deliver, disabled people hold back from forcing the contradictions of the ISA that confront them in their lives. Through the hope and happiness invested in the ISA, any future crip utopia is always already deferred. This is to say, the problem is not simply ableism. Rather, disabled people themselves are invested in the ISA as a beacon of accessibility, as tied to the history of disability rights, and as a symbol of pride. That the ISA has persisted over 40 years after its original design is not due to a lack of alternative symbols, but rather because the sign *does* something for disabled people. Disabled people have a vital investment in the ISA as evidenced by the excitement of disabled communities surrounding the newly designed ISA by the Accessible Icon Project. Disabled people want accessibility to work, and to work better. Participating in the affective happiness of wanting the ISA to work is a way of reinvesting in the neoliberal individual who ensures their own self-care through market relations. Simply put, the ISA is an affectively happy object, and an object of cruel optimism.

Showing up to ride an accessible bus and being told that I should just get a wheelchair if I can't climb stairs is a moment of cruel optimism. I am invested in the ISA, but I, individually, do not fit its production of disability or accessibility. While this anecdote ends with me returning home without taking the bus where I wanted to go, this moment also reveals what I have elsewhere (Fritsch, 2013) called the importance of utilizing the negative possibility of suffering for rethinking disability and to open up space for the transfigured crip to come.

While many important stories of disability are ones of exclusion, poverty, and erasure, this paper marks out important forms of inclusion. Such inclusion, however, comes at the cost of being integrated into capital by constituting a group of workers and consumers through the object of the wheelchair. The wheelchair then becomes the symbol of inclusion and accessibility for disabled people, and forms of inclusion and accessibility circulate happy affects.

While the ISA can be the source of disability pride, or a helpful sign to navigate around barriers, it also offers us a glimpse into the ways disability rights arose alongside the integration and capacitation of certain kinds of disabled people into capital and how that integration and capacitation is caught up in the circulation of happy affects. The ISA sets up the possibility of knowing disability, capacitating certain forms of disability and solving the problem of disability so that we can all collectively feel better. The collective ease of good feelings comes at the expense of the killjoy and at the expense of the benefit scrounging scum. Clearly, accessibility is important and the rights disabled people have fought for and won have often been necessary for mere survival, much less for flourishing. But at the same time, the debilitation and capacitation of disabled people happens within the context of neoliberalism, in the offloading of social issues onto the shoulders individuals, enabling corporations to make a profit off of debility and capacity, and of shifting public concerns into the private realm. It is within such a context that this symbol functions to both include and capacitate disability and to exclude and debilitate disability in certain ways, all the meanwhile making us feel good about consuming accessibility and feel like once the ISA appears, we've taken care of the problem.

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