"For *Them*, Not *Us*": How Ableist Interpretations of the International Symbol of Access Make Disability

Chelsea Jones

Ryerson University

Author Note

Chelsea Jones, Communication and Culture Program, Ryerson University.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Chelsea Jones, Communication and Culture Program, Ryerson University RCC317, Ryerson University, 350 Victoria Street, Toronto, ON, M5B 2K3. Contact: chelsea.jones@ryerson.ca

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Abstract

This paper uses a cultural studies lens to suggest that the ISA confers a semiotic imposition of "otherness" upon people with disabilities by signaling dominant, ableist cultural ideologies. Considering disability as representative of the culture in which it appears, the ISA's sometimes troubling manifestations emerge at certain intersections of our cultural landscapes where *us* and *them* meet and separate. This paper focuses on the disabled and non-disabled experiences through the author's self-reflexivity, and through the work of Liat Ben-Moshe and Justin Powell, as it queries the social spaces which inhabit and exclude the ISA as a cultural object tied to disability-related mythologies. The manifestations of this symbol in the author's cultural landscape hold political and social meanings that lead her to think about disability as a way of being in relation to others. The ISA can be read by spectators as sponsoring a highly problematic message about embodiment, binaries, and boundaries stemming from interpretations of the body in an ableist, Western culture.

Keywords: International Symbol of Access (ISA), accessibility, disability semiotics, disability mythologies

« Pour *eux*, pas *nous* »: Comment les interprétations discriminatoires du symbole international d'accessibilité font le handicap

Cet article utilise le prisme des études culturelles pour suggérer que le symbole international d'accessibilité (International Symbol of Access: ISA) contribue à une imposition sémiotique de « l'altérité » sur les personnes handicapées en signalant les idéologies dominantes du capacitisme. En considérant que le handicap représentatif de la culture dans laquelle il se situe, les manifestations parfois troublantes du ISA émergent à certaines intersections dans nos paysages

culturels, où « eux » et « nous » se rencontrent et se séparent. Ce document met l'accent sur les expériences des personnes handicapées et non handicapées, à travers la réflexivité de l'auteur, et grâce à l'œuvre de Liat Ben-Moshe et Justin Powell, qui interroge les espaces sociaux qui habitent et qui excluent l'ISA en tant qu'objet culturel lié aux les mythologies du handicap. Les manifestations de ce symbole dans le paysage culturel de l'auteur ont des significations politiques et sociales qui l'amènent à réfléchir au handicap comme une manière d'être en relation avec les autres. L'ISA peut être interprété par les spectateurs comme encourageant un message très problématique sur la corporalité, les binaires et les limites découlant des interprétations du corps dans une culture occidentale capacitiste.

Mots-clés: symbole international d'accessibilité (ISA); accessibilité; sémiotique du handicap; mythologies du handicap

"For *Them*, Not *Us*":

How Ableist Interpretations of the International Symbol of Access Make Disability

> Individual consciousness is not the architect of the ideological superstructure, but only a tenant lodging in the social edifice of signs. (Voloshinov, 1986, p. 13)

> Drinking black coffee, we discuss Barthes. He pricks. Embodies sweet bitter language. Pierces, arouses the vulnerable… (Halifax, 2009, p. 23)

> The various labels used to mark out individuals as "abnormal" or "handicapped" are ones that not only could be applied to you tomorrow, maybe following a cardiovascular accident or a train wreck; in fact one or more of them almost certainly will be applied to you at some point in your life if you live very long. (McWhorter, 2005, p. xv)

Introduction: Facing the ISA Today

On the icy porch of a tall brick house near downtown Toronto, I step outside and shut the door behind me. I stride toward the sidewalk, coated in crisp snow like a glazed cake. I dash across the street, fearlessly navigating curb cuts, ice patches, cracks in the cement, and a speed bump. The bus is rolling southward. I quicken my pace. I don't want to miss it. As I prepare to climb aboard, I notice that the bus does not display the International Symbol of Access (ISA), commonly known as the wheelchair emblem. As I board, I feel thankful that nobody using a wheelchair or mobility device had been waiting for this inaccessible bus. Reaching the subway station, I fly down two flights of stairs and wind through the turnstile, squeezing between bodies

to wedge myself into the subway car. Inside I see the ISA for the first time in my commute. Here it is, a little symbol as common in my cultural landscape as a light switch, making room for people whose bodies work differently than mine only now, just as my journey has nearly ended. Its placement here and now has political and social consequences: There has been no invitation for me to think about disability until this moment. So far disability has been present as an absence and, as person who currently identifies as non-disabled, the absence of the ISA has invited me to ignore disability as a cultural concept and to separate myself from its mythology: *It's not for us*, Titchkosky teaches us this absence suggests, *it's for them* (Titchkosky, 2008, p. 49; Linton, 1998, p. 168).

Signs wait for us; they are useless without our interpretations. They wait to be transformed from meaningless objects to tools holding messages. The familiar ISA is a sign, a signal, so embedded in our current cultural landscape that it has become part of our visual vocabulary; a regular sight for those of us with sight enough to confront it (Ben-Moshe & Powell, 2007, p. 490). Barthes describes semiological systems, such as objects and pictorial images, as objects of everyday use, which signify something (Rogers & Swadener, 2001, p. 41). They emerge through social interactions among groups and act as a means of communication for people semiologically: the signified and the signifier, the symbol and the sign (Voloshinov, 1986, pp. 11–12; Kasnitz & Shuttleworth, 2002, p. 35; Ben-Moshe & Powell, 2007, p. 490). Signs are evidence that discourse is as social as it is textual. The ISA's pictorial representation of a passive, white, right-facing figure against a dark blue background is designed simply to conform to international road sign conventions (Rehabilitation International E-4). This image calls to us and communicates heightened myths of disability that tell stories that may not align with the real life narratives of people with disabilities. The danger here is that the broadness of

disability is not conveyed by the ISA. Disability in all its fluidity and intricateness is stamped into our cultural landscape by one symbol, a mere image-object that directs us through spaces and adds little to our sociological imaginations (Mills, 1959; Barthes, 1982, p. 95).

Disability is representative of the culture in which it appears (Titchkosky, 2008, p. 42). Therefore, the ISA ought not be taken for granted. One way the ISA works its semiotic impositions is through othering. This article interprets this semiotic imposition of "otherness" as reflective of a wider, ableist, Western culture that promotes its ideologies through mythologies later articulated through ableist language (hooks, 2006, pp. 367–373; Mutua, 2001, p. 106; Ben-Moshe & Powell, 2007, p. 494). Such language, derived from symbols including the ISA, may "reflect and refract" reality by denoting ableist notions that distort the lived experiences of people with disabilities (Voloshinov, 1986, p. 10). Being nothing more than a signal, the ISA can be read by spectators, including myself, as a message about accessibility that has transformed into a message about disability. The ISA is a signifier for people with disabilities that they may inhabit only certain spaces that may also be shared with or appropriated by non-disabled people. Although the ISA tells us many things, it is important to consider one of its main directives: simply, that people with disabilities are welcome in only certain spaces. This also holds an oppositional message, that those with disabilities are unwelcome everywhere else.

The ISA as Icon

The ISA advertises the spaces where people with disabilities are meant to experience accommodation (Goldman & Papson, 1996, p. v; Rehabilitation International, E-4). Yet, even without being widely perpetuated by popular culture as a cultural signifier, this particular sign is heavily appropriated as one of the most widely recognized signifiers of disability in the world (Rehabilitation International, E-4). As disability studies researchers Ben-Moshe and Powell

(2007) write, “the ISA has become ubiquitous not just as a symbol of access, but of disability itself” (p. 495). The emblem exists as a symbol of disability amid discourse of everyday life, wherever people move around cultural spaces. Such movement includes my own daily, routinized presence on Toronto’s public transit system. The ISA’s presence diffuses meaning by adopting mythologies through its social usage—people with disabilities belong here, or there, or here again, but not everywhere (Ben-Moshe & Powell, 2007, p. 489; Goldman & Papson, 1996, p. 1; Barthes, 1982, pp. 105, 94). Indeed, the very presence or absence of this object is in itself meaningful, determining our understanding of its value (Barthes, 1982, p. 109–110). Here I explore the myths derived from this particularly common cultural object partly for its commonality, and partly because the seemingly impenetrable icon successfully resists attempts at resignification and reappropriation.

The context in which a sign is used is as important as the content of a specific sign itself. In the case of the ISA, its context tells a story of resistance towards ableism that constructs a disability identity. Such identities are appropriated by people with disabilities and those without disabilities (Zola, 1993, p. 19; Mutua, 2001, pp. 114–115). In their 2007 article, “Sign of our times? Revis(it)ing the International Symbol of Access,” which offers a thorough analysis of the ISA, Ben-Moshe and Powell (2007, p. 493) trace the symbol back to the 1960s. At the time, the president of the organization Rehabilitation International (RI) sought to replace local accessibility symbols with an internationally recognizable accessibility emblem. A decades-long process of design and redesign followed, with the ISA ultimately emerging in public spaces as an activist tool aimed at interrupting medical model thinking through the putting into practice of

social model-informed interventions.[1] The ISA's key function is to assist people with disabilities in identifying accessible facilities—and it fulfills this function well (Rehabilitation International, E-3). However, in the modernist tradition of opposition, the ISA is also reductive of disability. It reduces the concept of disability to the isolated and decontextualized image of a stick figure person sitting in a wheelchair. Though its merits are in its global translatability and its simplicity, one of the many messages it communicates is distorted: people with disabilities are passive, and they belong only here. This message is an ableist, cultural myth that risks promoting segregation and works against the symbol's original purpose by perpetuating the medical model ideology of disability as an individual problem over the social model understanding of disability as a consequence of disabling social constructions (Ben-Moshe & Powell, 2007, pp. 493–495).

As we appropriate disability as identity, it further becomes a cultural concept because subjectivity is always cultural. Disability, then, triggers internal responses in everyone who encounters the ISA, whether these responses are conscious or not. My response is anxiety when an inaccessible bus can include me as a passenger, but excludes "other" passengers who are blocked by the inaccessibility of the vehicle. I can only speculate about what the experience of exclusion would be like for non-accommodated passengers, who are told, through the absence of the ISA, that they are not welcome.

Such unwelcoming messages are culturally specific. To interpret the political and social meanings of signs used currently, it must be acknowledged that Western culture is flooded with objects, such as the ISA, that mark people with disabilities as "other" and exclude them (Barnes, Mercer & Shakespeare, 1999, p. 14). A ramp, for example, is another visual metaphor and a cultural construction of disability. N. Kagendo Mutua (2001) deconstructs the presence and

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[1] The accessibility symbol in current use is a modified version of the symbol chosen by the International Organization for Standardization to signify accessible spaces. For further details, please refer to ISO 7001: 2007 and Ben-Moshe & Powell, 2007.

absence of ramps in the US and Kenya as symbols of access with multiple and shifting meanings in the different contexts (p. 109). He describes the ramp as a sign with three levels: a signifier for “the way in” to a place; a marker of a culture that values accessibility; and a marker of freedom of movement and inclusion (pp. 110–111). The ISA can also be understood in terms of Mutua’s observations: the ISA is a signal that a person may enter the space; it is a marker of accessibility; and it suggests that a person is free to be in the space. At the same time, the ISA is also disabling because it is not present everywhere. It operates in the negative: rather than having the freedom to expansively occupy a wide space alongside others, disabled people may instead situate their bodies near the ISA and nowhere else. To notice the ISA is to notice that people with disabilities are not welcome in all spaces. Thus, the ISA tends to promote the construction of segregated spaces rather than the expansion of socially or physically inclusive spaces (Mutua, 2001, pp. 103, 107).

The ISA’s centreing of the image of a wheelchair reveals its Western cultural specificity, as wheelchairs are not used worldwide by people with mobility impairments, but are common in Western contexts, and remain “the prototypic representation of disability in Western societies” (Ben-Moshe & Powell, 2007, p. 497) Therefore, making the wheelchair the ISA’s emblem Westernizes global interpretations of disability (Ben-Moshe & Powell, 2007, p. 501). Cultural responses to disability, such as the presence or absence of signs meant to denote disability, reflect discrimination against people with disabilities as deeply entrenched in Western cultural influence (Barnes, 2010, p. 31). The ISA, then, is an important tool to observe because such devices designed to change the course of movement for people with disability have histories and context—often Western histories—that may be turned inside out and used to segregate people (Linton, 1998, p.167; Ben-Moshe & Powell, 2007, pp. 494, 501).

Problematizing the ISA Myth

Myth is not an object; it is a message that rises when an object is appropriated by discourse (Barthes, 1982, pp. 93–94, 105). Myth is not the primary communicator, but the metalanguage that emerges when we wish to interpret the symbol that does not speak for itself (Barthes, 1982, p. 100). The myth of the ISA, in this case, serves the metanarrative of ableism. As Ben-Moshe and Powell explain, the ISA is a commodity sign as it appears in public spaces, drawing its viewers towards a place of inclusivity and inviting us to brand ourselves as disabled or non-disabled by signaling a choice between spatial differences (2007, p. 494). In this context there is no narrative attached to the sign, no context (Goldman & Papson, 1996, p. 2). Instead what is left for the audience to internalize is a totalizing message about disability interpreted through an ableist myth derived from the emblem in three ways: First, the ISA intentionally conveys a deceptive sense of the totality of disability by leaving itself open to perplexing interpretations that both include and separate people with disabilities, serving to influence where people with disabilities are located in society and to solidify ableism through the objectification and segregation of disabled bodies (Williams, 2008, p. 133). Second, the ISA impacts the way people with disabilities are understood by the wider, dominant culture by creating an inaccurate understanding of disability as solely linked to the physicality of the body. As Ben-Moshe and Powell surmise, the emblem is a "metaphorical signifier" whose purpose emerges only because people with disabilities are not allowed in all facets of our communities (2007, p. 490). Finally, the presence or absence of the ISA has implications for how all people understand themselves within a broader cultural context.

The ISA pointedly describes people with disabilities as those exhibiting a purely physical state of being that does not fit with the supposed ideal bodily state (Williams, 2008, p. 133). In

this case, the sitting, wheeling, stagnant body perpetuates myths that disability is a summation of a person (Mairs, 1996, p. 40–41; Ben-Moshe & Powell, 2007, p. 498). Subsequently, the ISA underscores an image of itself as an object within an object; a sign within a sign, because it uses a wheelchair as a marker of disability, therefore, objectifying persons with disabilities by demoting them to the status of a wheelchair—a thing rather than a person. Summarizing the broad category of disability with the image of a wheelchair does not allow for the development of a concept of disability that includes its many broad and specific nuances and embodiments (Ben-Moshe & Powell, 2007, p. 497). Further, just as disability does not exist in a vacuum, the wheelchair-based ISA is not isolated, rather it is integrated into our collective cultural consciousness. This sign has become so culturally recognizable that its ideological representation of disability is rarely called into question. RI acknowledges that the symbol is not always used for its intended purpose, especially when no other adequate symbol is available. In its Assembly Resolution of 1978, which confirmed the ISA as an international pictorial representation of disability, RI also states that the members of its organization understand that the symbol inadequately encompasses a broad range of embodiments associated with disability (E-4). However, as Voloshinov (1986) asserts, "everything ideological reflects a semiotic value" (p. 9).[2] Therefore, it follows that every sign reflects an ideology. In this case, the dominant semiotic representation of disability as one particular thing—a body in a wheelchair—reflects ableist ideologies that confine the concept of disability to this specific image, rather than allowing for the opening of an imaginary that includes complex and varied states of being experienced by a broad population.

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[2] "Without signs," Voloshinov writes, "there is no ideology. A physical body equals itself" (9).

Because of disability's broadness, fluidity, and sheer resistance to neat categorization, it is difficult to differentiate between the signified and the signifier within a disability context. Yet, paradoxically, the ISA also represents a certain type of person quite accurately: A person using a wheelchair, and possibly positioned directly beneath the ISA itself. Indeed, for some people with disabilities, the signified here "is not 'a thing' but a mental representation" of something (Gold, 2001, p. 43). In other words, cultural locations of disability are very important because our current modernist interpretations of disability suggests that it is acceptable to measure and classify disabled people, and the discursive power of this ableist practice is strengthened when the ISA's textual and social significations are actually correct (Titchkosky, 2002, p. 106). In this way, the ISA *speaks disability* rather than *speaking about disability* (Barthes, 1982, p. 134). To give credit to its discursive purpose, the "sign-functions" of the ISA designate the wheelchair as an object, and indeed this designation undeniably reflects the sometimes-accurate reality that some people using wheelchairs *will* use spaces designated as wheelchair accessible in order to participate in social life, making it difficult to critique the ISA as an entirely inaccurate cultural representation of disability (Rogers & Swadener, 2001, p. 11).

To better understand the ISA, we may also observe it through Barthes' (1982) concept of functionalization. Here, the image of a white stick person resting on a cup-like shape is widely conceptualized within our culture as a signal of disability. On his blog, social commentator Joe Clark (2004) describes the emblem:

> [The ISA is a] stick figure with a tadpole's head plopped onto three-quarters of a wheel, with arms that double as the Tadpoleman's and the wheelchair's. The figure is nominally white and the ground is blue. It's pretty awful even as a symbol of specific wheelchair access due to its ugliness and its strange Borg-like union of Tadpoleman and machine.

However, in understanding this signal through semantic institutionalization, the sign communicates, inaccurately, that disability is exclusively confined to issues of wheelchair use (Gold, 2001, p. 43; Zola, 1993, p. 19), even though the ISA often appears in contexts other than those associated with concerns of physical access. For example, the ISA calls forth people with intellectual disabilities, who are often discriminatorily perceived to embody incompetence, when it is used to denote segregating cultural activities, such as taking a "special" bus to and from school. When people with disabilities other than those reflected by the ISA's image are perceived as fitting under the ISA's descriptive umbrella of disability, their disabilities are understood to have exceeded the common, socially acceptable notion of disability as a physical, recognizable condition like that signified by the ISA symbol. When the ISA is used to (mis)label disabled people who do not conform to its image, and therefore do not "look disabled," disability becomes the unknown, the strange, the questioned. The dominant, ableist understanding of disability is as a physical state of being, because it has been constructed as such by dominant discourses of disability including the image of the ISA. Those who understand disability in accordance with these dominant images find non-conforming and—to their eyes—inexplicable instances of the appearance of disability are jarring or even disturbing. Thus, the ISA contributes to the distortion of the reality of disability by applying an inappropriate emblem to differently-disabled people, who are then cast as deviant-deviants, and subjected to even more intense stigmatization.

Therefore, at first functional glance, the wheelchair ISA may be displayed to denote accommodation, but it ultimately fails. Instead of serving the purpose of promoting integration and recognition of personhood, in taking on a meaning broader than that which it can accurately convey, the ISA slips into signifying segregation.

The ISA as a Signal of Segregation

As a signifier of segregation, the ISA succeeds in creating social binaries. Its presence indicates that all spaces outside of those denoted by the ISA are not designed to accommodate the bodies and minds that experience disability in the context of a broader society that is exclusionary and ableist. Binaries are constructed when the emblem is interpreted to describe the relationship between bodies and their environments by pointing out the socially produced and rigidly enforced spaces between people with disabilities and those without (Linton, 1998, p. 10). Using Barthes (1982) second-order semiological system (pp. 97–99) it is clear that the ISA works covertly to divide us. We become the signifier and the signified; the oppressed and the oppressors; the subjects and the objects; the non-disabled and the disabled (Barthes, 1982, pp. 97–99). What results from these binaries is a cultural division that provokes “othering” by establishing contrasting bodies (hooks, 2006, pp. 367–373; Goldman & Papson, 1996, p. 11). In addition, the ISA also impacts how people without disabilities view people with disabilities, reducing disabled people to the status of objects to be looked at (Garland-Thomson, 2001, p. 346).[3] As Garland-Thomson (2001) indicates, the process of looking influences how sighted, non-disabled people conceptualize disabled people because “the images we see seem to ensnare truth” (p. 336). In addition, Dyer asserts, “how we are seen determines in part how we are treated; how we treat others is based on how we see them” (Dyer, 1993, in Titchkosky, 2008, p. 52).

A satirical example of this phenomenon is captured in an episode of the British television comedy *The IT Crowd*. In the episode, a non-disabled character, Roy, decides to use a washroom with the ISA label on the door, despite the protests of his friend who fears such an action might

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[3] The power structures created here are particularly relevant for blind people who do not necessarily return the gaze (Thomson, 2001, p. 346).

be illegal. As he attempts to flush the toilet, Roy mistakenly pulls a rope meant to alert theatre staff that the washroom user needs assistance. When he hears a staff member knock on the door Roy throws himself on the floor in an effort to prove that he fits the ISA image: his legs do not work. When questioned, he tearfully lies to the police that his wheelchair had been stolen while he was using the washroom, squeaking, "I'm disabled!" in response to requests for clarification. Roy spends the remainder of the episode as an object of pity, carried from place to place by staff as onlookers gaze at him and coo sympathetically. Eventually, Roy is supplied with a spare wheelchair and is sent "home" with a group of wheelchair users boarding an accessible coach. As the wheelchair lift slowly raises Roy into the coach, staff wave and smile warmly as Roy sheepishly waves back.

In my reading of the episode, disabled people are not the object of the program's humour; rather, the satirical comedy emerges as the non-disabled Roy is caught in a lie, and—more significantly—trapped by the condescension and infantilization to which disabled people are often subjected. The way that non-disabled people treat "one of their own" when they mistake him as disabled speaks to the displacement of disability in contemporary contexts and the ridiculousness of ableist discourses.

The mythologies driving the ISA define spaces for people with disabilities and directs people's placement in relation to cultural locations of disability. The emblem suggests access not only for wheelchair or other mobility device users, but also for anyone else who might choose, at one point or another, to use the accessible space (Ben-Moshe & Powell, 2007, p. 497). Again, the emblem is a "metaphorical signifier" because it allows people the opportunity to assign metaphor to disability and note the difference between space occupiers as disabled or non-disabled. Therefore the ISA is a tool of segregation, as it works to point disabled and non-disabled people

toward separate locations (Ben-Moshe & Powell, 2007, pp. 490, 494). As Ben-Moshe and Powell (2007) point out, “if universal design principles had been carried out fully we would have no need for [the ISA] because places and objects would have been designed from the start for a diverse population” (p. 394).

The ISA as a Reflective Sign

Signs of disability have implications for how people with disabilities may come to understand themselves. As Wendell (2010) writes, times exist when people with disabilities cannot attempt to make their bodies literally fit into their culture:

> They may wish for bodies they cannot have, with frustration, shame, and sometimes self-hatred; they may reject the physical ideals as narrow, unimaginative and/or repressive; or, like myself, they may fluctuate irrationally between these points of view. (p. 91)

Disability is a marker of identity, and its signs, such as the ISA, signify this identity. Signs hold meaning beyond their literal value, and this evokes emotions and actions—indeed we are not unaware of the meanings that move us. Anything holds the possibility to become a sign if it is assigned social meaning, as signs are social constructs (Voloshinov, 1986, p.12). Each sign is a reflection of reality and our reactions inform our social constructions of the world. People use signs, the “material of behavioral communication,” or the absence of them, to understand the world (Voloshinov, 1986, pp. 14–15). As Voloshinov (1986) writes: “understanding is a response to a sign within signs” (p. 11). In other words, people read signs and use internal understandings of semiotics (the study of signs and symbols, followed by the scrutiny of signifiers and signified) to interpret them (Goodley, 2011, pp. 104–105). Because the tools sometimes used by people with disabilities can be converted into signs, people with disabilities become connected to a symbolic image acting as an ideological product (Voloshinov, 1986, pp.

9–10). When no tools are used, disability is forgotten. Mutua (2001), for example, touches on the absence of signs and symbols in the lack of tools just as other scholars point to the absence of signs as a form of ableism represented by semiotics (Thoryk, Roberts & Battistone, 2001, p. 192). Objects that are part of the daily lives of many people with disabilities—teleprinters/teletypers (TTYs), canes, captions on videos, Braille print, communication boards, and so on—are not often part of the lives of non-disabled people. In referring to a scene of recess time on an elementary school ground in the early 2000s, Thoryk, Roberts and Battistone (2001) consider the exclusion of these kinds of objects from children's play: "I don't see any TTYs for the children to play with. Why? There is one at my house" (p. 192).[4] The way the experiences of disabled people are or *are not* articulated through cultural objects holds discursive meaning that impacts our cultural understandings of disability. The ISA is another object of only secondary concern to those who don't use it. Therefore, the ISA is an oddity; it is an obligatory object that points to the management of people with disabilities rather than serving as a means of promoting the social inclusion of people with disabilities. Consequently, people with disabilities may come to understand the oddity of the ISA as somehow reflective of themselves, rendering the problem of their not "fitting in" as a personal property of disabled people, rather than as a social failure[5].

From Icon to Iconoclast

In response to cultural symbols of disability that ring inaccurate, or only partially-representative of the lived experience of disability, people with disabilities have, in recent decades, engaged in

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[4] Recently, this kind of equipment has become less commonly used, as more D/deaf and hard of hearing people are using mobile phones and texting to communicate, due to the devices' lower cost, more widespread uptake, ease of use, and portability.

[5] Related to the above points are conversations about language, which do not fit in to the allowed space of this paper. These discussions include: signifiers that provoke language; the meanings of signs that hold value beyond their denoted signifiers when this value is articulated; the eventual transformation of the signified into language and the widely felt consequent effects of language on cultural understandings of disability; nonverbal articulations of disability-related signs; and the interpretations of such signs in multiple ways relating to cognitive diversity. However, it should be noted that people with visible disabilities embody a sign and become the signified (Barthes, 1970, p. 10).

self-authoring aimed at challenging current semiotic trends and changing cultural understandings of their lived experiences (Rogers & Swadener, 2001, p. 5). For example, the UK's "An Accessible Icon Project" is overlaying the ISA found in common spaces (washrooms, street signs, parking spaces) with a semi-transparent sticker. The sticker is a re-vamped image of the ISA stick person that is meant to be more active. In the new image, the figure is leaning forward, the arms behind the chair as if the person is in motion (Hendren & Glenney, 2013). Such deconstruction of disability as a cultural concept leads to the rethinking of the semiotic and linguistic construction of disability, moving people with disabilities away from the object position into the subjective position through critique—this process of gaining knowledge has an emphasis on language and discourse as it related to culture (Corker &Shakespeare, 2002, p. 4).

The process of textual self-representation is particularly important for people with intellectual disabilities because they do not often have opportunities to share their stories in public forums, partly because they are often considered unreliable sources, even of their own stories (Goodley & Rapley, 2002, pp. 128–129). Certainly language marks disability experiences, and the disabled authors of these experiences depend on language. This is particularly problematic given the transformative potential of mediating personal experiences through language and text, which serves not only to recover suppressed voices and experiences, but may also enable those engaging in the authorial process to transform their own perceptions of their experiences, enabling them to challenge their positions in the world (Halifax, 2009, pp. 53–54). As Halifax (2009) writes,

> If there is no language for the marks on our bodies, our world home, then there is a possible death, a sinking into ground. The unfolding of sensuous languages resuscitates

> the potential to communicate an aspect of the world whose meaning… would otherwise sink (p. 34).

Certainly, what people say about their lives holds insight into the social world to which they relate (Yates, 2005, p. 70). Myths and truths that open the lives of people with disabilities rest in words and dialogues about exclusion and belonging and the uninhibited commentary on our culture (Hughes, 2005, p. 89).

As my earlier discussion of Mutua's interpretation of ramps as symbols of access suggested, the meaning of disability is not only constructed through language, but is also shaped by the built environment. Linton (1998) can be credited for her rethinking of environments that would include signs relevant for people with disabilities, and those without disabilities, in an effort to unfold ableist binaries. She explains that even where budgetary constraints prevent architects from taking a more radical approach to universal design, making meeting the basic requirements of accessibility standards laws the priority, it remains possible to incorporate signs as design elements in order to promote inclusivity and highlight accessibility as a social priority. Linton writes

> …even putting a sign in Braille and in print on the wall that says "please touch" alters the environment, and suggests to sighted people that touch is an important means to access beauty, information, and ideas. (1998, pp. 167–168)

Linton (1998) argues that disability studies should begin branching beyond its theoretical foundations and into other disciplines like architecture, so that students can learn about inclusive design. Ben-Moshe and Powell (2007) cite several instances of disability-based organizations reimagining and redesigning the ISA to offer commentary on the politics of its representation (pp. 494–495, 499). Indeed, disability scholars and activists are calling for the creation and

adoption of more symbols of disability (Davis, 2010, pp. 301–303; Ben-Moshe & Powell, 2007, p. 501). To imagine people who can break free of the conditioning of mythologies and cultural signs is a promising beginning.

The creation of disability-highlighting and inclusive signs and spaces will also help create common spaces where people can move together toward better understandings of the complex social and cultural experience of disability, something that may not be possible using the kinds of language-based attempts to reverse stigma that other oppressed groups have often taken up. Davis (2010) draws on Zola's (1993) explanation of this phenomenon:

> With the rise of black power, a derogatory label became a rallying cry, "Black is beautiful." And when women saw their strength in numbers, they shouted "Sisterhood is powerful." But what about those with a chronic illness or disability? Could they yell, "Long live cancer" "Up with multiple sclerosis" "I'm glad I had polio!" "Don't you wish you were blind?" (Zola, 1993, p. 168 in Davis, 2010, p. 302).

Linton (1998) also notes that ongoing attention to the medical needs of people with disabilities is important, but it tends to reinforce the notion of disability as personal tragedy (p. 10). Further, labeling a person as an object of medical scrutiny evokes a senses of helplessness and abnormality (Zola, 1993, p. 17; Davis, 2010, p. 3).

Reconsiderations of Meaning Making

Dispelling myths is no easy task. There are restrictions in this paper alone. A notable gap here is the interpretation of lived experiences of people with disabilities and the messages the ISA evokes for them. This paper is written from my perspective as a white, Western woman who does not yet inhabit disability as part of my self-identity. The understandings of disability as

outlined in this essay are culturally situated, beginning in a space a short distance from my home and projecting to wider spaces in contemporary Western culture.

Further, although ableist readings of the ISA result in discrimination against people with disabilities, the object's interpretations retain a sense of accidentalness amid these critical readings. After all, its origin with the IR testifies to its purpose of inventing social spaces for people with disabilities and transferring the locus of disablement from the individual body to the inaccessible environment. Additionally, although the pictorial representation of disability is biased towards a sighted audience, it does offer a broad communicative method to people who better understand images than words (Rehabilitation International E-3; Ben-Moshe & Powell, 2007, p. 493). Finally, the image does not portray any particularly negative stereotypes of disability, unlike many of the other images of disability circulating in our culture. Certainly pictorial signs denoting disability can be more than symbolic; they exist as functional tools or objects in our culture and take on multiple meanings (Ben-Moshe & Powell, 2007, p. 490). For example, researchers of disability in advertising have identified reflections of religious interpretations of disability as a fetishized, suffering state; people who are wondrous, exotic monstrosities; and the embodiment of sentimentalism as the disabled person is infantilized (Garland-Thomson, 2001, p. 338–346). By comparison, the ISA displays a fairly passive, innocuous, image of disability: a sitting figure assisted by a wheelchair, peacefully (if not stagnantly; without a sense of humanizing movement).

Facing the ISA Everyday

The elusive and evasive role of semiotics in disability discourses distorts our idea of disability as surely as it provides the tools to articulate disability. Our interpretations of the ISA make people with disabilities something other than who they are. In a failed attempt to provide proof of social

integration, the ISA is read negatively in contemporary Western culture as it assigns exclusionary to the concept of disability. Such discursive productions as the ISA are a perpetuation of language that demotes disability to an object rather than a way of being. This statement also suggests an absence of disability, which suggests the speaker has passively absorbed ableist thinking that renders disability invisible and therefore disregards an integral part of personal identity. As bell hooks (2006) notes, we are unlikely to produce theory that will challenge domination—including ableist domination—if we remain passive observers of current cultural thinking that objectifies or forgets people with disabilities.

Further, Williams' "social" definition of culture sees culture as a description of a particular way of life that "expresses certain meanings and values" (Williams, 1980, in Storey, 2006, p. 34). Storey (2006) explains this definition when he writes, "culture as a particular way of life, culture as an expression of a particular way of life, and cultural analysis as a method of reconstituting a particular way of life" (p. 35). Certainly, if one way to view culture is that of the day to day lived experiences of people, disability and the values attached to the concept of disability must be included in discussions of culture triggered by cultural objects such as the ISA (Storey, 2006, p. 35). Because the values of such objects are expressed through semiotics, one way to rethink disability is by considering the way signs and words are used to denote disability, and associating these signs with the historical context of the world within which we live (Barthes, 1982, p. 105). As a common, everyday object, the ISA promotes the inaccurate expectation that disability is solely a property of individual physicality. In this sense, the emblem is a "metaphorical signifier" that is only necessary because people with disabilities are included in designated social spaces as dictated by dominant, non-disabled groups (Ben-Moshe & Powell, 2007, p. 490). Additionally, objects of disability such as the ISA impact how we understand

ourselves (whether we experience disability or not) in relation to the concept of disability. The ISA's solitary position amid a cultural landscape with few other objects that could be read as signifier of inclusion, points to disability as an unavoidable concept met with obligation by the dominant, ableist culture.

So here I stand—yes, stand—on the sidewalk, the bus, the subway. I understand that many of the people around me inhabit disability, whether visible or not, and that I expect to someday inhabit disability as well. For today, in my position as part of the dominant, ableist group, I commit the offense of looking at disability when I see that I share the space with someone with a visible disability. I may look only for a moment. But in that mere moment my attention diverts towards disability and I am confronted with disability as a cultural concept. I can sense by other's gazes, too. The cultural myth of disability as provoked by the ISA is not that people feel more compelled to include people with disabilities in cultural spaces, as was the spirit of the emblem at its original emergence. Rather, the motivating myth is that people are compelled to conveniently segregate people with disabilities to designated areas chosen by ableist, dominant culture. Societal inclusion of people with disabilities remains a less powerful myth than the ableist notions of segregation reproduced by the ISA. Until objects of disability trigger myths of personhood over myths of impairment, ableism will prevail (Ben-Moshe & Powell, 2007, p. 498). My hope is that by directing my attention to discrimination embedded in our understandings of cultural objects I will advocate for everyone to share public spaces in order to break down the *us* and *them* dichotomy. With all of us embodying transcendental nuances that both betray and conform to cultural positioning, we all deserve the same space value.

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