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### Title

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### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/87b4k57s>

### Journal

Radical History Review, 2012(114)

### ISSN

0163-6545

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### Publication Date

2012-10-01

### DOI

10.1215/01636545-1597988

Peer reviewed

## On Walkers and Wheelchairs

### Disabling the Narratives of Urban Modernity

*David Serlin*

During the closing credits of *One Night Sit* (2004), a short documentary by Carmelo Gonzalez and Diana Naftal about the romantic challenges faced by gay men with disabilities in New York City, a dog walker stands in front of a typical boutique in the heart of Chelsea, the celebrated locus of the city's gay male population. The boutique is one of dozens along the commercial cruising district of Eighth Avenue that thrives despite, or perhaps because of, the neighborhood's long and inexorable march toward homonormative domesticity. The boutique window bursts with two muscular male mannequin torsos bedecked in tiny bikini bathing suits. These are wares, one presumes, that are intended to capture the all-consuming eye of a gay male flaneur—perhaps only a fantasy of tourists rather than one participated in by actual residents. Like its US counterparts in San Francisco's Castro, Chicago's Boystown, or Seattle's Capitol Hill, Chelsea has become an urban landscape in which the frisson of the queer encounter that once took place on sidewalks is now more likely to occur via iPhone apps like Grindr.

One window in particular, however, seduces the attention of the dog walker, a stand-in for the filmmakers' POV:

*Eureka, ladies and gentlemen: we have found a disabled mannequin here in Chelsea . . . on a pedestal, no less. On a pedestal! Proudly displayed. No arms, no legs, and, most importantly, no head. You can't get more disabled than that, ladies and gentlemen. And still looks gorgeous in a bathing suit.*

*Radical History Review*

Issue 114 (Fall 2012) DOI 10.1215/01636545-1597988

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*How does he does [sic] it? We don't know how he does it. But you know what? I think it's fabulous. You see: Chelsea is not as closed-minded as one may think.*<sup>1</sup>

The observer's comments about the headless and limbless torso on display in the Chelsea boutique window are meant to mix and parody histories of popular entertainment—in particular, the voices of the carnival ringmaster, the Coney Island freak show barker, and the camp affectation of the burlesque emcee. These are the kind of voices that once saturated the risqué and often socially marginal entertainment zones of large metropolitan cities like New York. But such comments also self-reflexively invoke other lurid histories of urban spectacle. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century freak shows and dime museums—their once-familiar presence all but erased from the well-trod thoroughfares of Times Square, the Bowery, and Sixth Avenue, only blocks from Chelsea's gay boutiques—along with their more “legitimate” counterparts in medical lecture halls and natural history museums depended upon decidedly



Scene from *One Night Sit*, dir. Carmelo Gonzalez and Diana Naftal (2004). Courtesy DCTVny.org

nonnormative bodies as case studies for the pathologizing and scrutinizing gaze of science and medicine. Whether to be gawked at and exploited for quick profit, or to be studied, experimented upon, and rehabilitated, queer and disabled bodies were both sought out and deeply disdained. They were measured either explicitly or implicitly against an increasingly industrialized, socially regimented,

anthropometrically normative ideal—a body that fit the economic mandates of the modern state's needs for rationality, hygiene, and productivity.

Queer bodies and disabled bodies have their own unique urban histories, sometimes overlapping but more often than not remaining divergent. For many people with disabilities, however, the echoes of the carnival barker, the surgical specialist, and the museum curator are ever-present ghosts that still haunt the narratives and occupy the spaces of the modern city. The frustrations that many of the gay disabled men interviewed in *One Night Sit* experience in the dating circuit can be extrapolated outward to characterize the social alienation many people with disabilities, gay or otherwise, experience in the urban environment on a regular basis. In their exclusion from the circuitry of daily life, they endure a status that the late Paul Longmore once described as being “socially dead,” a riff on Carol Pateman's

description of a wife's existence under marriage law as being "civilly dead."<sup>2</sup> Indeed, even with the protections and accommodations of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, in many urban scenarios bodily difference continues to serve as a catalyst for intersubjective and institutionalized forms of intolerance, many of which instantly reify the legacies of a eugenical and seemingly illiberal past. As Rosemarie Garland-Thomson has discussed in her book on the politics of staring, disabled people are routinely subjected to a pitiful public gaze, even though in recent years they have also been empowered legally and socially to stare back.<sup>3</sup>

Urban historians as well as scholars in cognate fields such as urban studies, architectural studies, and cultural geography have invested unknown quantities of energy in unwittingly—or, one could argue, quite wittingly—preserving the normative physical and cognitive privileges of the urban subject, no matter how socially or politically marginal the subject actually is. This is especially true of the *flâneur*, the Parisian street walker described by Charles Baudelaire in the 1860s and popularized by Walter Benjamin in the 1930s. The great irony, of course, is that despite his glamorous intellectual and political pedigree the flâneur has always functioned as an outsider. His power resides in his capacity to move with the crowd but never be a part of it, to belong to the social but never to formally affiliate. But while the psychological or aesthetic modalities through which the flâneur experiences the world may deliberately diverge from the mainstream, in the end the nineteenth-century Baudelairean figure is motivated as much by the presumptive and categorical reliance on his able-bodiedness as by the promised epiphanies of hashish and absinthe. A proper flâneur must have possession over his bodily sovereignty and, indeed, complete autonomy to navigate his way through the city. That is, one must not only be unaffiliated but also be nondisabled, cognitively normative, and have eyes and ears and legs that function in a normative way.<sup>4</sup>

In the 1980s and 1990s, some feminist historians began to challenge the class and gender privileges that inhered to the flâneur as an urban type and argued for the necessary inclusion of nonmale (and, later, nonheterosexual) narratives in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century city.<sup>5</sup> And following from Marxist and post-colonial critiques of static or unidirectional urbanisms, the metropolitan (and largely imperial) privileges of the flâneur began to be dismantled and transformed into their necessary non-Western and transnational iterations. Industrial archaeology, walking history tours, and other interactive engagements with the built environment have produced cosmopolitan forms of *flânerie* that make the alleys and arcades navigated by Baudelaire and Benjamin seem like provincial petit bourgeois excursions by comparison.

That the flâneur, as both a historical subject and as a contemporary iteration, has remained in such a relatively fixed state of able-bodied privilege despite these disciplinary and methodological revolutions in academic scholarship seems to comment on the way that disability has been written out of *la vie quotidienne* of urban

modernity.<sup>6</sup> From grand narratives to microhistories, from Baron Haussmann's Paris to Robert Moses's New York City, disability as a differential of modern social experience is rarely integrated into the constitutive subjectivities of modern urban history. It is as if historians believe that the lives of urban subjects with disabilities are so distinctly different from those of nondisabled subjects that they could hardly be expected to transform canonical understandings of urban modernity.

The British artist Marc Quin intentionally challenged the legacy of disabled invisibility in the urban public sphere when, in 2005, he exhibited *Alison Lapper Pregnant*, his most well-known sculpture. Quin chose Lapper, a British artist born without arms and with foreshortened legs, as his subject just as she had entered her eighth month of pregnancy. Hewn from fifteen tons of Carrera marble, the same ornamental and expensive material used by Renaissance sculptors to produce their most enduring work, the completed Lapper sculpture (which looks like a classical bust from a distance) was placed on an empty plinth in the middle of Trafalgar Square in central London. It sat directly between the public entrances to the National Gallery and the National Portrait Gallery until the end of 2007.

Regarded by factions of the British public and press with both praise and revulsion, for two years *Alison Lapper Pregnant* transformed the topic of disability into an intentionally public spectacle. More important, however, it also forever transformed the historical space of Trafalgar Square (and all of its past and future contexts) into an intentionally public referendum on bodies subjected to British imperial power. In a space recognized for displaying statues of male royalty and military heroes—most notably Admiral Nelson's Column, the traditional focal point of the square—as well as a famous site for tourism and Christmas and New Year's Eve celebrations, the exhibition of *Alison Lapper Pregnant* confronted citizens who identify Trafalgar Square as a place that consolidates national pride and achievement with a body that seems both unrecognizable and to a large degree even impossible. Nelson's Column, and the military statuary on the three other plinths, are permanent and as such are emblematic of the putative permanence of state power as manifest in the nondisabled male body. By the same token, the plinth on which Quin's sculpture was installed is the so-called empty fourth plinth, originally intended for equestrian statuary, and now given over to a rotating selection of temporary installations.<sup>7</sup>

Peering down from its myth-generating height, the sculpture's relationship to questions of urban modernity and national identity (not to mention histories of public art) became far more open ended than perhaps even Quin had originally anticipated. Was, for example, the placement of *Alison Lapper Pregnant* part of an effort to highlight the temporary status of the disabled female urban subject alongside its permanent nondisabled male counterparts? Was the sculpture intended to underscore the inevitably illusory nature of able-bodiedness, as literally embodied in national fantasies of nondisabled military masculinity poised on shining plinths in urban public



Photo of *Alison Lapper Pregnant* by Marc Quin, Trafalgar Square, London.  
Taken by Liz Flowers, September 21, 2005

spaces? Ultimately, however, the monumentalizing of Lapper's white, disabled, pregnant body became an unavoidable allegory for Britain's capacity to tolerate forms of difference—the disabled, female, queer, aging, postcolonial, transnational—that must be reflected back upon a nation that can no longer depend on the kinds of fixed normativities of place and identity that originally produced public spaces like Trafalgar Square in the first place.

Some historians have sought to challenge the imbalance between those who narrate the urban landscape and those whose experience gets captured and narrated by others. Susan Schweik's masterful *The Ugly Laws*, for one recent example, looks at the emergence, in large and small US cities since the 1870s, of municipal vagrancy codes designed to keep poor, disabled, and other "unsightly" bodies out of public view. Schweik uses both archival and artistic source materials to insert legal, social, and literary narratives deliberately into more recognizable social, political, and cultural histories of urban modernity, and these utterly recalibrate how we

understand the transformation of urban American culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>8</sup> In a similar vein, the author and illustrator Brian Selznick's recent novel, *Wonderstruck*, depicts visually what happens to one deaf character in Hoboken, New Jersey, in 1927 after a local cinema undergoes the technological transition that enables it to show sound films.<sup>9</sup> For historians of technology, the arrival of "the talkies" is typically regarded as a triumph for media consumers. But for members of the Deaf community, which heretofore had been able to participate in at least one form of mass entertainment with the rest of the nondisabled population, it was an unprecedented blow. The equation of cinema as a medium of sound and vision, and the privileging of hearing as a normative modality of modernity, served both to obscure the silent era as a period of shared cultural history and to facilitate the Deaf community's alienation from mass culture.

Schweik's and Selznick's works respectively confirm that the critical tropes used to characterize and explain urban subjectivities typically have been institutionalized around the nondisabled subject. They also actively disturb the comfortable presumptions of dominant and canonical works of urban modernity that continue to imagine a world of able-bodied spectators for whom the terms of modernity are defined sensuously if not exclusively through the visual, the auditory, or the mobile.<sup>10</sup> This is not to say that works of urban historical scholarship have been irredeemably ableist or saddled only by reductivist thinking. In recent years, for instance, responding to charges of ocularcentricism found in much art history and visual culture studies, there has been an outpouring of work on urbanism and the senses, much of it owing to the pioneering work of Alain Corbin's classic *The Foul and the Fragrant*.<sup>11</sup> As a result, other sensorial configurations—the olfactory, for instance, or the tactile—and the nonnormative potential of those configurations to reinterpret urban modernity have emerged to become part of the analytical landscape. Yet there remains a core lack of recognition that many individuals do not experience the world through conventional sensorial or cognitive processes, and that there are many further still whose experience of the world is sensory-impaired or sensory-heightened, such as in the case of individuals on the autism spectrum.

In much the same way that historians have been encouraged to "queer" the streets, perhaps they also might be encouraged to "crip" the streets, too—or, at least, to consider the imaginative possibilities of what might be accomplished by "cripping" histories of urban modernity beyond merely offering thick descriptions of cities or their populations. Some urban historians might take inspiration from the work of contemporary architectural theorist-practitioners, such as Karen Franck, Rob Imrie, Juhani Palassmaa, and Peter Zumthor, which uses design and planning to recover the experiential and sensorial dimensions of architectural and spatial embodiment.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, their work typically focuses on bodily morphologies that are often excluded from canonical or professional discussions of architecture. By paying attention to *how* people interface with spaces, and how they make meaning out



of their spatial and social relationships, such theorist-practitioners put appropriate emphasis less on the deliberate, programmatic aspects of architectural design and more on the possibilities of subjective exchange and sensorial interaction that take place between the body and the environments in which the body circulates.

Such work also explicitly exposes and deprivileges the ways in which the non-disabled urban subject is as much a social fantasy as that of universal humanism or whiteness or heterosexuality, themselves culpable fantasies of liberal modernity that are exploited to seem as if they are natural, coherent, and unchanging. As Pieter Verstraete has argued, the greatest challenge for scholars who encounter disability is “not to reduce the other to the self, but to expose the self to the other” so that “history will serve as an instrument not to enable the past, but to disable ourselves.”<sup>13</sup> Along with crippling urban modernity, urban studies scholars might also be encouraged to treat disability conceptually—not as a bodily deficiency to be overcome but as an environmental characteristic to be interpreted. This is one of the central tenets of disability studies as a field: making the distinction between what is called the medical model of disability (treating bodily impairment as a deficiency to be repaired so that a person can be accommodated by society) and the social model of disability (treating social expectations and demands as a deficiency to be repaired so that society can better accommodate bodily difference). The distinction between these two models lies largely in the latter’s recognition that improving and strengthening the built environment—literally transforming the architectural and spatial configurations in which disabled people live, work, and circulate—can be the conduit to responsible social citizenship and political empowerment.

For historians, then, the paradigm shift may come in the form of treating disability not as a component of individual bodily impairment or social identity but as a neglected historical component of urban revolutions that were deliberately and systematically planned in the crux of modernity. The expansive growth of European cities beginning in the late Middle Ages and early modern period has been characteristically attributed to the rise of emergent forms of socioeconomic power that depended upon territorial acquisition and segregation and the management of bodies through hierarchical religious, fraternal, and civic organizations.<sup>14</sup> In early seventeenth-century London, for instance, real estate speculators and urban planners were responsible for naturalizing the relocation of urban subjects within grids of newly incorporated and privately held urban spaces. As Patrick Joyce has argued, much post-Enlightenment city planning and civic architecture carries with it the legacies of control over its subjects that were intended to produce normative forms of behavior and citizenship.<sup>15</sup> This is why architectural forms used in public settings from the eighteenth century forward have been traditionally yoked to the belief in a core liberal subject who can be improved, adjusted, and rehabilitated to become productive and autonomous. It is not mere coincidence that, in 2008, a stamp issued by the government of Bangladesh in honor of the International Day for Persons with Disabilities placed the fig-





Stamp commemorating International Day of Persons with Disabilities, issued by the government of Bangladesh, 2008

ure, in the foreground, of a young man on crutches, looking off in the distance with apparent hope at the sight of the National Assembly Building in Dhaka. The stamp commemorates the late American architect Louis Kahn's monument to the people of Bangladesh, a building that has been identified as one of the emblematic architectural artifacts of mid-twentieth-century modernism.

Joyce does not specifically focus on how people with disabilities engaged historically with the built environment. But Joyce does make it abundantly clear that the kind of institutions responsible for making the modern city possible and through which nineteenth- and twentieth-century cities found their most vivid expressions were also responsible for the containment of bodies that did not, could not, and would not conform to legal, medical, or social attempts at standardization, regulation, and system-wide control. Some might argue that both the disabled and non-disabled are equalized, and therefore neutralized, under liberal modernity's dual dialectic of bodily autonomy produced through tacit forms of consent, the trade-off that secures a level playing field for everyone. Historically, however, people with disabilities have been positioned, and continue to be positioned, poorly within such a dialectic. The absence of theoretical sophistication and methodological finesse for capturing and interpreting limitations, and possibilities, created by the built environment for people with disabilities continually demonstrates the failure of urban historians to engage with those whose urban navigation systems are facilitated by differential subjectivities, or by assistive devices, or by the care of others—or perhaps by some combination of all of the above.

Meanwhile, the mystical aura imputed generically to liberal modernity, the illusion of freedom and bodily autonomy that was putatively conferred upon the nondisabled, is what has been used to compensate them psychically for their lack of access to socioeconomic and political power. From a disability studies perspective, this mystique has worked brilliantly—a *What's the Matter with Kansas?* for those invested in the illusion of their own able-bodiedness. But such ontological distinc-

tions have profoundly serious consequences. When urban historians choose to favor certain modalities of subjectivity, even unwittingly, at the exclusion of others, they are in fact contributing to the tacit support of rhetorical claims about which bodies count and which ones do not, which ones deserve the resources of the city and which ones do not, which ones incorporate the modern and which ones get left behind as its residue or simply remain stuck in the primordial pulp of the premodern.

This is precisely the catalyst for urban exclusion that Gonzalez and Naftal try to illuminate in *One Night Sit*. The (hetero)sexual and (dis)able-bodied politics of urban life are co-constitutive of how we understand the tacit privileges of certain kinds of bodies that gain access to the street and those that gain access to spaces like bars, restaurants, boutiques, and so forth. This is not only because of the particularities of class or race or social status or age that accrue to gay urban experience, but also because of the inability of some urban subjects to gain access to the front door, let alone to sexual gratification. The documentary's title makes a subtle but brilliant pun on the colloquial phrase, rooted in the post-1960s liberationist ethos that emerged in cities like New York, for someone who has casual sex with a stranger. For a nondisabled (and particularly prudish) viewer, such a pun involving the imminence of disabled sexuality might invoke the unimaginable.<sup>16</sup> Yet for the disabled and their many supporters and admirers, such a pun lays bare at least one type of cultural practice, taken for granted by generations of nondisabled urbanites, that previously differentiated people with disabilities from their normative counterparts. In one singular burst of appropriation, then, *One Night Sit* reimagines the flaneur within a nexus of local histories and urban institutions that historically endeavored to segregate him and control his destiny. Sometimes a walker is neither a person nor a position but a sturdy metal appliance used to extricate us from tight situations.

## Notes

For insightful and encouraging comments on early drafts of this essay, thanks to Robyn Autry, Joshua Frens-String, Val Hartouni, John Howard, Kevin Murphy, Danny Walkowitz, Judy Walkowitz, and *RHR*'s two anonymous reviewers.

1. *One Night Sit*, dir. Carmelo Gonzalez and Diana Naftal (New York: DCTV, 2004), DVD. Thanks to Catherine Martinez for her generous assistance with securing the film still for *One Night Sit*.
2. Carol Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988), 67.
3. See Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Staring: How We Look* (New York: New York University Press, 2008).
4. For further articulation of this concept, see David Serlin, "Disabling the *Flâneur*," *Journal of Visual Culture* 5, no. 2 (2006): 193–208.
5. For some prominent examples, see Janet Wolff, "The Invisible *Flâneuse*: Women and the Literature of Modernity," *Theory, Culture & Society* 2, no. 3 (1985): 37–46; Susan Buck-Morss, "The *Flâneur*, the Sandwichman and the Whore: The Politics of Loitering," *New German Critique* 39 (1985): 99–140; Judith Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins

- University Press, 1992); Deborah Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, the City, and Modernity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Erica Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure: Women in the Making of London's West End* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); and Mark Turner, *Backward Glances: Cruising Queer Streets in London and New York* (London: Reaktion, 2004). For a more recent example, see Aruna D'Souza and Tom McDonough, eds., *The Invisible Flâneuse? Gender, Public Space, and Visual Culture in the Nineteenth Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006).
6. See, for example, Nancy Forgione, "Everyday Life in Motion: The Art of Walking in Late-Nineteenth-Century Paris," *Art Bulletin* 87, no. 4 (2005): 664–87.
  7. Thanks to John Howard for pointing out this distinction.
  8. See Susan Schweik, *The Ugly Laws* (New York: New York University Press, 2010).
  9. Brian Selznick, *Wonderstruck* (New York: Scholastic, 2010), 140–47.
  10. Some of the books that have helped to constitute this historiography include Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Vanessa R. Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-de-Siècle Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001); and Emily Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America, 1900–1933* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004). For a more recent work of scholarship that challenges the able-bodied presumptions of the historiography on modern technology, see Mara Mills, "On Disability and Cybernetics: Helen Keller, Norbert Wiener, and the Hearing Glove," *differences* 22, nos. 2–3 (2011): 74–111.
  11. Alain Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant: Odor and the French Social Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988). See also Constance Classen, *The Book of Touch* (New York: Berg, 2005); Veit Erlmann, ed., *Hearing Cultures: Essays on Sound, Listening and Modernity* (New York: Berg, 2004); David Howes, ed., *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader* (New York: Berg, 2005); and Mark M. Smith, *Sensing the Past: Seeing, Hearing, Smelling, Tasting, and Touching in History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).
  12. See, for example, Karen Franck and Bianca Lapore, *Architecture from the Inside Out* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley, 2004); Rob Imrie, *Disability and the City* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1996); Juhani Palassmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley, 2007); and Peter Zumthor, *Thinking Architecture*, 3rd ed. (Basel: Birkhauser, 2010).
  13. Pieter Verstraete, "Toward a Disabled Past: Some Preliminary Thoughts about the History of Disability, Governmentality, and Experience," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 39, no. 1 (2007): 61.
  14. See Valentin Groebner, *Who Are You? Identification, Deception, and Surveillance in Early Modern Europe*, trans. Mark Kyburz and John Peck (New York: Zone, 2007).
  15. See Patrick Joyce, *The Rule of Freedom: Liberalism and the Modern City* (New York: Verso, 2003).
  16. For more about the "unimaginability" of disabled sexuality, see the recent volume from Robert McRuer and Anna Mollow, eds., *Sex and Disability* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).