Disability Represented in/as Culturally Disruptive Bodies within the “Quebec Charter of Values”
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Within Canada, disability is understood as a problem that must be solved (Mitchell & Snyder, 2013). When disability is conceived of as a problem, it suggests that there is something inherently wrong with disability. Disability has always existed. Disabilities that will not go away or cannot be fixed become deviance. If disability is conceived of as a problem, disabled people are understood as deviant aberrations within society. The problem of disability then lies within the individual. Disability is not understood as a social construct. It is therefore the responsibility of the individual to manage their disability or else it will be ‘managed’ for them.

Canada has used notions of deviancy to pathologize ‘non-white populations’ in order to affirm white settler legitimacy over the land (Erevelles & Minear, 2010). Disability is thus mobilized within a nation-building discourse that imagines Canadian citizens as white able bodies. A sort of ‘ultimate capability’ is therefore embodied within whiteness while disability is embodied within racial difference (Erevelles & Minear, 2010). Erevelles and Minear (2010) explain that systems of power attach disability to ‘difference’ in order to justify ongoing systemic injustices against oppressed populations by declaring, “biological difference as the ‘natural’ cause of all inequality” (p. 133). The construction of ‘difference’, including racial difference, is bound up in nation-building processes and is inextricably linked to notions of disability.

“The Quebec Charter of values” is a current example of how the State uses its institutional power, in this case through legislation, to assert white settler legitimacy over the land. This charter bans public workers from wearing religious headwear and symbols (Peritz & Perreaux, 2013) in an effort to keep public institutions ‘neutral’. Bernard Drainville, the minister in charge of the Charter, explains that “if the state is neutral, those working for the state should be equally neutral in their image” (Peritz & Perreaux, 2013). The Charter bans religious wear such as the Muslim hijab, niqab and the Sikh turban but allows for public workers to wear small crosses and Stars of David and exempts the Catholic symbols attached to Quebec street names, institutions of government and cultural sights from being subject to the laws of the Charter (Peritz & Perreaux, 2013). The Charter thus demonstrates what is considered neutral. Western cultural norms are understood as neutral. Westernized bodies that do not threaten hegemonic whiteness are considered neutral. On the other hand, bodies that physically represent foreign cultures (read: non-white) are posed as offensive and furthermore, punishable. Drainville demonstrates how the discourse of neutrality is necessary in keeping the Settler State, a body of immense institutional power, white (Peritz & Perreaux, 2013).

At the same time as this legislation draws clear lines between culturally appropriate bodies (read: westernized) and culturally disruptive bodies (read: Muslim female bodies), it also embeds ability in appropriate bodies and limitation in disruptive bodies. The notion that Muslim female bodies represent limitation is evidenced in that the majority of discussion surrounding the Charter has centered on a discourse of ‘freeing’ Muslim women from an imagined ‘oppression’ (embodied within the hijab and niqab) (Hamilton, 2013). In “The Color of Violence”, Erevelles describes the mainstream discourse of the westernized woman in relation to the third world woman, of which the State is greatly invested in:

“...Western describes a certain normative construction of woman (read: educated, modern, having control of one’s body, and the freedom to make one’s own decisions) against whom the ‘average third world woman’ is compared and found to be lacking...represented as leading an ‘essentially truncated life on account of her gender (read: sexually constrained) and her being ‘third world’ (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc.)’...These images constitute third world women as an embodiment of lack and mirror ableist representations of disabled women, who also struggle against the stereotypical images of pathetic victimized femininity that justify patriarchal, imperialist, and ableist interventions” (Erevelles, 2011, p. 120, my italics).

Thus the State is able to represent itself as a liberator of women by masquerading this current legislation as benevolent towards Muslim women. This legislation lets both imagined Canadian citizens and imagined immigrants know that ‘disruptive’ bodies must and will be policed. This is evidenced
through the ways in which Muslim women are being targeted by this legislation: violence against Muslim women has risen since the Charter has been put on the table (Hamilton, 2013). Garland-Thomson speaks of how images shape our perceptions and sanction certain behavior, “...by using conventions of presentation that invoke cultural ideas and expectations”, this in turn manifests, “...power relations between the subject positions of disabled and able-bodied...” (2002, p. 57). Here we see how laws, like images, are powerful forms of cultural representation. They shape how our societies imagine themselves; laws tell us which bodies are disruptive (or even likely to be disruptive) and which bodies are not. Even though the proposed hijab/niqab bans have not yet passed at the time of this writing, violence against Muslim women has risen as the public has begun to police these women themselves (Hamilton, 2013). Therefore laws sanction certain behaviors (i.e. violence) that would not have been previously socially accepted.

Unlike the concept that Erevelles and Minear discuss, in which biological difference is attached to bodies of color and posed as a natural source of disability (2010) in the case of Muslim women, disruptive culture is seen as the source of disability. Gender, perceived immigration status, religion and race are all seen as sources of disability that oppress the Muslim woman. In other words female Muslim bodies are seen by the Quebec government to be ‘disabled by their culture’. Culture is therefore a “problem in need of a solution” (Mitchell & Snyder, 2013, p. 1). Thus, in order for Muslim women to assimilate into Canadian society, they must symbolically and literally remove their cultural difference, embodied in Islamic dress such as niqab and hijab. The solution to the problem of disruptive Islamic culture has showed itself in the mobilization of institutional power to exclude non-compliant Muslim women from public space. Through legislation such as hijab/niqab bans, “...the state ‘looms large in women’s lives only when women transgress the boundaries set by the state ...” (Erevelles, 2011, p. 120 - 121). By constructing Muslim women as ‘disabled by their culture’, attention is then shifted from the Islamophobia innate within the Charter and put onto Muslim women. Muslim women are now seen to impose limitations upon themselves if they refuse the removal of hijab and niqab. Consequently, the Muslim woman is at fault if she cannot find work or if she cannot leave her house without facing violence. This mirrors the way in which disabled people are constructed as deviant and are in turn held by the State, as responsible for their own disabilities.

The mapping of space to embody Canada’s ‘imagined’ population (read: white able citizens) is a nation-building process that highly influences how we come to understand ‘productivity’. If space is constantly made inaccessible to disabled people and/or peoples of racial, sexual, cultural and religious difference, then it is not hard to imagine these bodies as ‘unproductive’, ‘burdens on society’ and therefore ‘dispensable’. This process of excluding difference from public spaces and institutions is integral to the very shaping of difference as disability. In her article “Geographic Stories”, Katherine McKittrick (2006) explores how geographic space has been mapped to produce “racially, sexually and economically hierarchical” (p. 3) interactions within society. In the case of Muslim women in Quebec, this also applies to culture, which is of course bound up in conceptions of ‘racial difference’. Thus, this world that presents itself as benevolent and open to all, has in fact been carefully arranged to privilege, “white, heterosexual, [middle] classed” (McKittrick, 2006, p. 3), able males. By analyzing how geographic space is produced to exclude deviant bodies from the public, it is possible to see how disability is produced and socially maintained.

The Quebec Charter Values is a clever way to keep public spaces and institutions white. The Quebec government is arranging space hierarchically through legislation. This legislation excludes Muslim women from public space and reinforces the exact stereotypes it claims to be fighting. This Charter will therefore maintain Islamophobia and support future xenophobic immigration policies. Muslim women will be excluded from public spaces and institutions. Islamic culture is imagined and constructed as something that imposes limitations upon Muslim women and transforms them into ‘unproductive citizens’ and ‘burdens on society’.

The Quebec Charter of Values is thus a current real world example of how the white Settler State uses legislation to further assert and maintain its power over the land. Mainstream discourses normalize white/westernized bodies by posing bodies that represent cultural difference, such as those of Muslim women, as a threat to western conceptions of freedom. Cultural difference then comes to represent ‘limitation’ while whiteness represents ‘ability’. Patriarchal legislation that bans niqab/hijab is then portrayed as benevolent, as working towards ‘freeing’ the Muslim woman. This excludes Muslim women from public space and reproduces Canada as a white nation. The State is then
able to reassert its benevolence towards marginalized peoples as well as its supremacy as a Western nation – a beacon of freedom and democracy.

References


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