



Everyone has a story to tell: an autobiography in museum disability research practice¹

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ENG Abstract: This article aims to act as an important and politically grounded counternarrative to the dominant discourse of disability, having the potential to unravel the myth of normalcy that undergirds so many of the exclusionary practices today. It will be focused on the author's biography in the world of disability and in the ways in which this legacy was reflected in her academic research, lecturing classes and conference presentations in the area of disability studies, particularly in the field of visual arts and museums studies. Concepts related to the cultural meaning of disability and its representations within museological practices will be explored to introduce new views related to the potential of museums to be active agents in social inclusion. As a final objective, this article is intended to contribute to the development of innovative and more positive perspectives on the identity of people with disabilities, supporting their active participation within the museum sector as producers of meanings, creating fairer and less prejudiced interpretations around museum collections to publicly present disability stories.

Keywords: Disability, Research, Museums, Biographical Perspectives, Education.

ES Todos tenemos una historia que contar: una autobiografía en la práctica de investigación sobre discapacidad en los museos

Resumen: Este artículo pretende actuar como una contranarrativa importante y con base política al discurso dominante sobre la discapacidad, teniendo el potencial de desentrañar el mito de la normalidad que sustenta muchas de las prácticas excluyentes en la sociedad actual. Se centrará en la biografía de la autora en el mundo de la discapacidad y en las formas en que este legado se reflejó en su investigación académica, docencia y presentaciones en conferencias en el ámbito de los estudios sobre la discapacidad, particularmente en el campo de las artes visuales y los estudios de museos. Se explorarán conceptos relacionados con el significado cultural de la discapacidad y sus representaciones dentro de las prácticas museológicas para introducir nuevos puntos de vista relacionados con el potencial de los museos para ser agentes activos en la inclusión social. Como objetivo final, este artículo pretende contribuir al desarrollo de perspectivas innovadoras y más positivas sobre la identidad de las personas con discapacidad, apoyando su participación activa dentro del sector de los museos como productores de significados, en la creación de interpretaciones más justas y menos prejuiciosas en torno a las colecciones de los museos para presentar públicamente historias sobre discapacidad.

Palabras clave: Investigación, Discapacidad, Museos, Perspectiva Biográfica, Educación.

Summary: 1. Introduction. 2. The experience lived in the world of disability. 2.1. The encounter with myself. 2.2. The encounter with my father. 2.3. The encounter with a new disabled identity. 3. Museums and blind and partially sighted people - the misunderstanding promising. 4. The promising stories of disability in museums narratives. 5. Narrative practices in my teaching classes and conferences. 6. Final considerations.

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1. Introduction

This article delves into the reflections that have shaped my approach to constructing scientific knowledge in museology, prompting questions about the cultural significance of disability. It introduces theoretical and practical inquiries surrounding the representation of disability, challenging museums' roles as developers of cultural meanings and as spaces of social exclusion and inclusion. Also, will acknowledge museums potential to perpetuate discrimination and stereotypes through their practices.

While rooted in my experiences as a researcher in museology and disability studies, this article will explore my own biography, embracing the uncertainty paths that have influenced my professional journey of thinking and conducting research on disability and museums. There are multiple motivations driving this exploration. On one hand, I am intrigued by the interplay between a researcher's biography and the production of scientific knowledge within academia, as it mediates relationships between individuals and their environments, both physical and imagined (Hadley, 2015). On the other hand, I aim to weave narratives of disability and identity as a focal point of study disability representations in museums.

Indeed, biographies have long been recognized as social constructs, bridging the gap between social reality and individuals' experiential worlds since the modern era (Gillberg, 2020). By focusing on my own biography, I hope to deepen understanding of the lives of individuals with disabilities within their socio-historical contexts, traversing cultural representations, and the way how they shape perspectives on disability significance and influence interactions between disabled and non-disabled individuals, seeking to examine the construction of my own identity alongside conventional notions of otherness (Mitchell, 2000). Also, scholars in disability studies increasingly draw on a more interdisciplinary range of texts in their research including disability autobiographies (Breckner, 1998; Newman, 2013; Olesen, 2015).

2. The experience lived in the world of disability

2.1. The encounter with myself

In an article authored by Alves et al. (2018), which focuses on non-technical aspects of aesthetic accessibility in museums, the authors recount the story of their own encounter in the academic realm. This encounter was described as a "mixed encounter" between a non-disabled university professor and a disabled master's student, with the former serving as the advisor to the latter. Both individuals had experiences with blindness, although in different contexts: the professor was the daughter of a blind father with extensive research experience in visual disability, while the student was herself blind, embarking on her academic journey in the realm of disability research. Upon reading this article, I immediately resonated with the narrative of this "mixed encounter," albeit with some differences.

My encounter was not precisely between myself—a senior researcher with a substantial background in museum disability research—and a disabled student. Nor was it a physical meeting in a specific time and space. Rather, it was an encounter with myself, occurring on a metaphorical level and involving subjective transformations regarding the meaning of disability in my life. Also, it was a meeting with my own father, who is a blind man due to a retinal lesion that led him to total blindness in adulthood. Like the second author mentioned, during my master's studies in 2006, I chose a research topic focused on issues related to sensory access for blind and partially sighted audiences in visual-art museums. Similarly, like the first author, I am also the daughter of a blind father, which have intersected with my research journey in museology and disability studies since several years.

Having a biographical relationship with the topic of disability is not a prerequisite for conducting disability research in academia, as is the case of many academics and museologists interested in disability as a field of study or professional practice. However, a fundamental premise that framed my entry into the realm of disability studies field was the idea of meeting the interests of disabled people with the aim of improving their quality of life and access to human rights. Perhaps due to my biographical relationship with disability, this premise naturally guided my research objectives. Since the beginning of my academic research career, I've understood the importance of this premise, remained unchanged until today: enhance the life experiences of disabled individuals in society by studying the relationships between museums, art and disability.

Additionally, another essential premise that conducted my research in disability studies arena, was the abandonment of a researcher's position of power and neutrality regarding the researched object, putting my knowledge and skills in the service of people with disabilities while striving for objectivity (Martins et al., 2012). In my research practice, I have always included people with disabilities through participatory methodologies (Inckle, 2023). I've organized mediated museum visits to transmit my knowledge in art history to participants with disabilities, while integrating their perspectives into my research process (Wernick, 2023). These academic achievements have allowed me to reflect on the transformations that have occurred in my cultural understanding of disability over the years. Thus, I can delineate a clear transition in how I have perceived disability— from a biographical perspective, intertwined with the darkness of my father's blindness, to a more academic perspective, viewing disability as a process, lifestyle, and socially constructed phenomenon (Oliver, 1992). In this sense, my research in disability studies arena has been an encounter with myself, touching on aspects that intersect with my identity and personal stance on disability, openly acknowledging it as a part of my life journey marked by "biographical inscriptions and struggles around the disability meanings" (Alves et al., 2018, p. 585).

2.2. The encounter with my father

Disability experience in my life also meant a meeting point with my own father, shaping a significant aspect of our relationship, thus a defining element of my biography since I was born. Disability played an active role in our connection, creating a space filled with both knowledge and affection within our interactions. The narrative of our meeting intertwines with my personal story, adding depth to my understanding of myself.

My father was born with a retinal lesion that gradually led to total blindness around the age of 35. Before that, frequent visits to specialist doctors delivered unsettling news, offering no solution to his condition except the certainty that he would eventually lose his sight entirely. This period was marked by years of anguish as he anticipated the day when his vision would fade completely. From my earliest memories, I never perceived my father as a blind person. To family and friends, he was someone who has “difficulties to see”, and who was gradually losing his vision. This perception persisted even after he had lost his sight completely, shaping his self-image as well. The fateful day predicted by medical experts never came to pass; instead, my father’s vision diminished progressively, and slowly, over the years. During this time, we existed within a world of disability permeated by stigma and prejudice, where blindness carried a heavy burden not solely due to my father’s inability to see, but also because of the sense of otherness it imposed. Social isolation, concealing one’s disability, or striving to blend in to avoid scrutiny, characterized our experience in the disability world. Jaeger et al. (2005) suggest that social classifications of disability form the basis for societal reactions towards disability, shaping accepted perceptions of the roles and capabilities of disabled individuals. Throughout history, people with disabilities have endured widespread social suffering across cultures. In our lives, my father’s blindness was often framed as an individual issue, overlooking the societal reactions that influenced our understanding of disability (Hughes, 2012). Pity, more than any other emotion, became the prevalent response from those without disabilities towards our condition within the world of disability.

2.3. The encounter with a new disabled identity

A significant turning point in my father’s life marked a new trajectory towards embracing disability. Following the breakdown of his marriage, he faced the prospect of losing the support necessary for his daily tasks. It was then that he made the pivotal decision to pursue independence by enrolling in a rehabilitation center for the blind people. This decision required him to confront personal challenges, including accepting his status as a blind person with a disability, despite having already been blind for many years. In this sense, my father’s decision to rehabilitate himself, preparing himself to acquire technical skills in the field of blindness to carry out his day-to-day tasks, confirms Martins’ theory (2006) when considering that this decision often occurs in the lives of blind people when it becomes strictly necessary to be autonomous.

At the Nossa Senhora dos Anjos Rehabilitation Center in Lisbon, my father embarked on a transformative journey into the world of disability. Through various techniques learned, he gained independence in his daily activities. A significant milestone was mastering the daily bus commute from home to work and back, navigating the streets of Lisbon with a white cane—acting at the same time as a social symbol of his blindness. With this cane, he publicly acknowledged his blindness while also exposing himself to the varied social reactions it elicited, ranging from indifference to pity or condescension towards his perceived fragility. Indeed, for many blind people, the transition to using a white cane represented a challenging yet transformative step, symbolizing newfound capabilities and joy in living (Martins, 2006).

Moreover, the rehabilitation center provided my father with his first meaningful social interactions with other blind individuals. Prior to this, his encounters with other blind individuals were likely limited to visits to doctors, inside a medical environment. This newfound community alleviated his sense of profound loneliness, fostering enduring friendships that endure to this day. Through these connections, my father’s retinal damage, once a source of negative impact, ceased to define his life, and he relinquished hope of a cure or restoration of vision. This transformation in his perception of blindness stemmed from his interactions with others at the Rehabilitation Center, revealing that one thing is the person’s injury - which is biological and individual - and another thing is the disability - which is social and collective (Braddock et al., 2001). The injury is, in fact, a generator of disability, but only in the encounter with the *other* who is not disabled. In this sense, despite being born with a retinal lesion, my father was not born disabled, he *became* disabled. Thus, disability became *his way of life* (Oliver et al., 2012).

Likewise, disability cannot be dissociated from the issue of identity. In this sense, a person with an impairment is not a person with a disability, it is not something that can be transported. Disability is part of the identity of a person with an impairment, driving the way they interpret and relate to the world. In the case of people with disabilities, the problem arises from the simple observation that their social identity is, in fact, a non-identity since it was not constructed by people with disabilities themselves (Pedraza, 2010). As Jaeger et al. (2005) considered, this identity was constructed by the *other* through representation practices framed in a discourse, that is, in a set of ideas formed from certain contexts, from a certain time or society, which dictated the social conduct and the most appropriate knowledge for dealing with disability. These representation practices were created over time through images, stories, categorizations, emotions and words that were told about people with disabilities. Thus, because these cultural meanings around disability have not been constructed by people with disabilities themselves, the identity of people with disabilities results from a set of pre-conceived ideas, concepts and/or stereotypes. Most of the time, it is these pre-conceived ideas that end up designing institutional policies and practices developed around disability. This idea explains, in part, the reason why people with disabilities have been discriminated against and excluded over time (Barnes et al., 2010).

Also, Hall, in his study dedicated to the analyses of representation practices around social minorities, considered that cultural meanings are not just in “our heads” – they organize and regulate social practices, influence our conduct and consequently generate real and practical effects. Thus, the meaning we give to disability is made through the way we represent them – and share them among members of our culture – through the words we use to refer to them, the stories we tell about them, the images we use of them, the emotions we associate with them, the way we classify and conceptualize them (Hall, 1997). The fact that disability has a very negative cultural significance leads that people with disabilities do not accept belonging to the world of disability. Resistance to assuming an identity linked to the world of disability is common to most people with disabilities. The stories of suffering associated with the experience of blindness are closely related to the social meaning of blindness, in fact incorporating a part of the collective history of blind and partially sighted people.

This narrative underscores the importance of understanding disability as a socially constructed phenomenon. While an individual’s impairment is biological and unique, disability arises from interactions with a society that defines and categorizes individuals based on preconceived notions and stereotypes. The stories of suffering intertwined with the experience of blindness reflect broader societal attitudes towards disability, encapsulating a collective history shared by those with visual impairments (Pedraza, 2010; Sturm, 2017). Indeed, this resistance to embracing a disability identity mirrors my own journey.

3. Museums and blind and partially sighted people - the misunderstanding promising

In a Moraes’s disability narratives article (2010), the author shares a thought-provoking story about a young congenitally blind girl trying to perform a sighted dancer in a theater play taking place in a space bridging together blind and sighted individuals, introducing a reflection on the “misunderstanding promising” new topic. The story is about the desire of a blind girl who was trying to act as a sighted dancer, seeking to dance in “the correct way”. In this task she was deemed ineffective, deficient, and mistaken by both sighted and blind observers, highlighting a divergence from what is “the correct way of dancing”. This concept of the “promising misunderstanding”, as elucidated by Despret (1999) and echoed by Moraes (2010), suggests that such misunderstandings can pave the way for new interpretations and versions of events, creating opportunities for novel understandings to emerge. This opens a space for instability and variation, particularly in interventions between blind and sighted individuals, challenging the notion of a fixed order of things.

This narrative resonates with my own experiences dating back to 2006, when I embarked on my master’s degree in Museology and Museography and chose to explore how blind and partially sighted individuals could engage with visual arts museums in Portugal (Martins, 2008). At the time, few museums in the country catered to blind and partially sighted visitors, with limited provision of guided tours for this audience. Faced with this dearth of resources, I turned to international references, with Brazil serving as my initial point of inquiry. An internship at the rehabilitation center Fundação Dorina Nowill in São Paulo, under the guidance of doctoral researcher Viviane Sarraf, provided me invaluable insights into theoretical reflections on social inclusion (Sassaki, 2002) and museological practices for the blind and partially sighted people. This period marked a pivotal phase in my academic journey, underscoring the resonance of my research question with broader concerns within the field of museology, positioning blind and partially sighted people as a valuable audience for art museums.

After this internship and back to Portugal, armed with newfound knowledge and motivations, I endeavored to facilitate museum visits for blind and partially sighted individuals, employing in my master research multi-sensory teaching methods and pedagogical resources such as tactile replicas and Braille tables. By orchestrating guided visits to the Modern Art Center of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, in Lisbon, using a focus-group methodology, I aimed to shift perceptions of blind visitors from being recipients of special educational needs to active participants capable of engaging with art on their own terms.

For many of those focus-group participants, these museum visits represented their first encounter with visual arts since losing their sight, or their first museum visit altogether. Witnessing their engagement with artworks and observing their perspectives enriched my understanding of art and blindness. Indeed, this research practice methodology, reaffirmed my conviction on the importance of museums being promoters of inclusive practices (Martins, 2008). Despite logistical and resource challenges within the Portuguese museum sector, the impact of having blind and partially sighted participants collaborating in academic research underscored the potential for redefining the role of blindness within visual arts museums spaces (Martins, 2017). This period marked a pivotal phase in my academic journey, underscoring the resonance of my research question with broader concerns within the field of museology. By interacting with the visual arts through non-visual senses, which differ from most museum visitors, they will necessarily bring to the field of artistic practices new understandings and new relationships as valid as those generated by non-disabled visitors.

However, this endeavor also unearthed systemic barriers to accessibility and inclusion in the arts within the museological sector. The hegemonic perspective that visual- arts is only being capable to act as a primarily visual experience posed, long time ago, fundamental challenges to accommodating the basic requirements for the blind and partially sighted visitors participating in the visual arts museums. Commonly, tactile adaptations used in museums often replicate visual patterns, overlooking the unique properties of touch and neglecting to cultivate a truly tactile aesthetic. In this sense, reimagining accessibility in the arts requires advocating the importance of mediation and experimentation practices to foster meaningful engagement, over more technical solutions (Alves et al., 2019; Almeida et al., 2010).



Fig.1. Focus-group visits with blind and partially sighted people in the scope of the author's master dissertation at the Modern Art Center of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 2008. Image: Patrícia Roque Martins.

For this, the notion of disability as a socially constructed phenomenon is central to this discourse, challenging prevailing norms and perceptions within cultural institutions. Exclusionary practices in museums stem from cultural conventions that marginalize blind and partially sighted individuals, perpetuating misconceptions about their capabilities and interests. As highlighted in some focus-groups discussions led with a total of twenty blind and partially sighted participants, societal attitudes towards disability shape institutional practices, reinforcing a cycle of exclusion and marginalization.

Thus, the concept of the “promising misunderstanding” (Moraes 2010) offers a lens through which to reevaluate established norms and practices within cultural institutions. By embracing diversity and fostering inclusive environments, museums can serve as catalysts for transformative experiences, challenging pre-conceived notions and expanding the boundaries of artistic engagement for all individuals (Museums Association, 2020), regardless of their sensorial interactive ability.

4. The promising stories of disability in museums narratives

Moraes' reflection on the “misunderstanding promising” leads to reconsider disability representation in museums and challenge entrenched narratives. By recognizing the malleability of cultural conventions, museums can leverage misunderstandings as opportunities for transformative change. But how can museums harness this potential and reshape the stories told about disability? What transformations might ensue in the cultural understanding of disability?

Historically, disability has often been relegated to the margins of public memory, buried in footnotes and overshadowed by dominant narratives (Delin, 2002; Tooke, 2006; Martins, 2018). Majewski et al. (1998) highlighted the importance of full accessibility in museums, advocating for public access to exhibitions addressing disability themes, many years ago. Yet, despite these calls for inclusion, representations of disability remain sparse and often negative, reinforcing stereotypes and marginalizing people with disabilities.

In 2015, I started my post-doctoral project with the aim of studying the representation of disability in the national museum collections of the Directorate General for Cultural Heritage (DGPC) of Portugal. I analyzed a set of museum collections of a diverse nature – from archaeology, furniture, painting, sculpture, photography, musical instruments, among others – located chronologically from prehistory to contemporary times, with the aim of finding objects representing disability, that were created or used by people with disabilities or personified them. Additionally, I analyzed the inventory texts which were produced by museum professionals to contextualize these objects, published in the online inventory “Raiz” (Museus e Monumentos de Portugal, 2024).

I found objects that reveal important stories of disability, such as musical instruments that were played by people with disabilities, photographs that document theater plays with actors playing characters with disabilities, figurines that personify gods with disabilities, several people with disabilities in the practice of begging,

instruments used by people with disabilities, disability support technologies models that have evolved over time or, even, important Portuguese culture celebrities with disabilities. I therefore understood that the stories of disability are part of our common heritage, even though they are often represented in a negative way. In many cases, the stories of disability remain unrevealed to the museum audiences or, in other cases, some museum objects representing disability are not considered having a relationship with the topic of disability in the inventory texts (Martins, 2018).

The case of the DGPC museum's collections is a very explicit example of how people with disabilities were represented to produce certain emotional reactions in their audience, reinforcing the development of stereotypes. At the same time, they reflect the most appropriate discourse to address disability in each geographic context or chronologic period. From antiquity to contemporary times, people with disabilities have been represented to evoke very specific feelings, namely those of compassion, fear, mystery and charity, not appearing as ordinary members of society. The lack of alternative messages, which could be explored by other interpretation models, in addition to the descriptive texts of the inventory, will reinforce and/or naturalize existing messages, having negative effects on our shared culture, on the meaning attributed to disability and, consequently, in the audiences that visit museums and assimilate these messages. On the other hand, negative disability messages will also produce negative effects on the lives of people with disabilities, contributing to consolidating and promoting the construction of a practical, political, social and cultural imaginary based on prejudices and stereotypes. To reverse this trend, museums must embrace a more inclusive approach to disability representation, celebrating the contributions of individuals with disabilities to our shared cultural heritage.

For instance, objects like the clay figure of a blind man playing a hurdy-gurdy from the Museu Nacional de Etnologia exemplify the need for nuanced interpretation. This figure presents several interpretative layers that allow us to understand the way in which blindness is represented and is being communicated in museums. Firstly, the man represented holds a musical instrument - the hurdy-gurdy-, usually associated with historical representations with people with disability in the act of begging. It was therefore considered a less socially worthy musical instrument in many of the written interpretations made about it. Visually, it also demonstrates that blind people were in many cases represented in begging practices, clearly associated with negative social statuses to correspond to certain cultural stereotypes. Also, the object title of the inventory descriptive text is "Man playing the hurdy-gurdy", nevertheless - accordingly to the inventory information- it was previously identified with the title "Blind of the hurdy-gurdy". This change in the object's title cannot be considered innocent, effectively producing effects and framings, demonstrating the intended to hide the representation of a blind man. This concealment of an identity linked to disability ends up weakening it, erasing it from our collective memory. By acknowledging the blindness of the figure and reframing its title accordingly, museums can disrupt harmful stereotypes and foster a more accurate understanding of disability.



Fig. 2. *Man playing the hurdy-gurdy*, dated from 20th century, from Museu Nacional de Etnologia, Portugal.
Image: <http://raiz.museusemonumentos.pt/>

Similarly, is the example of the romantic writer Feliciano de Castilho (1800-1875), who went blind at a young age and is represented in several objects in the DGPC museum's collections, whether in paintings, sculptures, drawings, photographs, among others. Because he was blind, unlike the writers of his time he studied by ear and dictated all his literary work. Thus, the result of his literary work was probably influenced by his blindness, demonstrating the importance of reordering disability and its positive impact as a creatively and successful personality in his field, within our common past and public exhibition. By highlighting disabled individuals like Castilho, museums can challenge prevailing narratives of disability as a deficit and instead celebrate the resilience and creativity of people with disabilities.

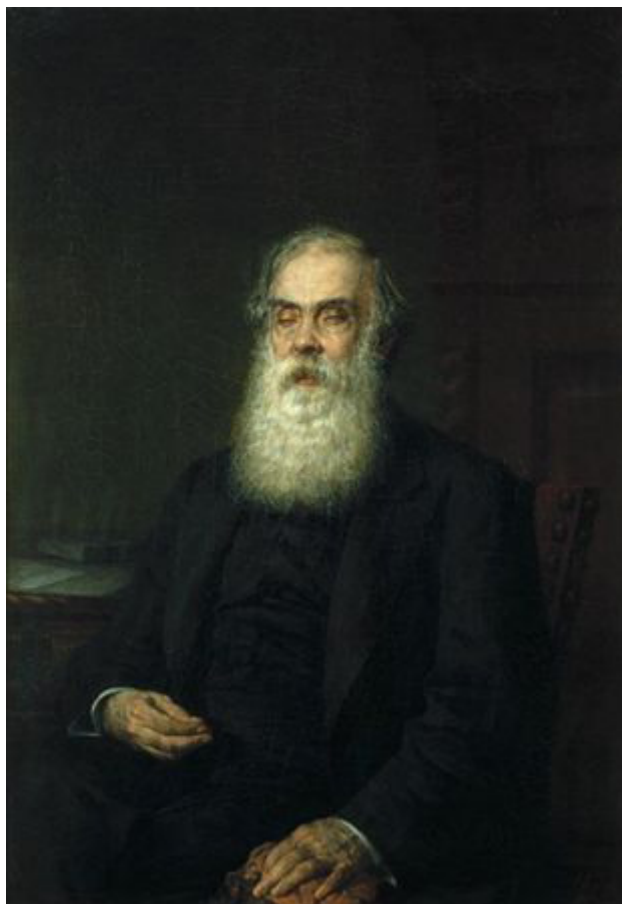


Fig. 3. *Portrait of António Feliciano de Castilho*, authored by Miguel Ângelo Lupi, dated from 1873, from the Museu Nacional de Arte Contemporânea, Portugal. Image: <http://raiz.museusemonumentos.pt/>

The contemporary disability dancer and writer Niepce, who uses performance to empower disabled people's voices, is another Portuguese example. For instances, Niepce's choreographic work calls for a reimagining of disability as a political force for social change, challenging normative ideals of the body and promoting alternative aesthetics rooted in lived experiences of disability, incorporating the disability-arts concept in the cultural sector².

However, despite this growing awareness of disability art and culture, museums have been slow to integrate these perspectives into mainstream discourse worldwide (Sweeney, 2012), as in the case of Portugal disability-arts exhibitions where often lack curatorial expertise and critical engagement, perpetuating a cycle of marginalization and exclusion. This situation is due to the lack of artists and curators with disabilities working in the museum sector, as well as the existence of few exhibitions within the scope of disability-arts interested in challenging norms and reporting life experiences of social oppression. The theme of disability has often been addressed in accessibility and inclusive art practices of the museums' educative department. Without ongoing dialogue and critical reflection, the potential of disability-arts to challenge dominant narratives and expand cultural diversity remains unrealized (Kuppers, 2021).

5. Narrative practices in my teaching classes and conferences

Throughout my journey in disability research practices, I discovered the use of auto-narrative as a fundamental method for opening spaces for creativity and empathy in teaching classes and conference presentations. This approach led me foster critical thinking and address the real need for societal change among students.

² (See <https://aniepce.com>)

Various studies have pointed out that most university teachers are white and middle-class, with limited experiences of interacting with social minorities and ethnic-racial groups. This has led to a lack of understanding of cultures and life experiences different from their own (Bersh, 2018).

By asserting my autobiographical and research trajectory, I aim to counteract this cultural gap, which has been considered a factor that generates and perpetuates cultural biases. Moreover, by reflecting on my autobiography and values in relation to disability, I seek to play a significant role in raising students' awareness of discrimination and social inequality. I address issues related to the everyday experiences, needs, and specific ways of living that characterise the cultural background of people with disabilities in their social, economic, and working interactions with their environment. Only in this way can the teaching paradigm be questioned, as well as the perpetuation of achievement inequalities among different student groups.

In addition to my own biographical story and its relation to the ways I have developed academic research in disability studies, the narratives of other academics with disabilities who have contributed to paradigm shifts in the fields of visual arts, art history, curating, and museum education are also included in my teacher education classes or conference presentations.

Several academics with disabilities are mentioned, such as: Amanda Cachia – a short-stature independent curator and Assistant Professor at the Kathrine G. McGovern College of the Arts at the University of Houston. Her work has focused on contemporary curatorial practice, challenging the traditional concept of “access” in museums. For example, Cachia promotes the idea of “creative access” with the political goal of developing a complex curatorial model for contemporary art exhibitions, where access devices – such as sign language, written and audio translations – are incorporated into the concept, structure, and material of an exhibition, considering the involvement of artists, with or without disabilities, who use access as a conceptual axis of their practice (Cachia, 2023).

Ann Millett-Gallant is an art historian, disability studies scholar, and Senior Lecturer at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. She is the author of two books: *Re-Membering: Putting Mind and Body Back Together Following Traumatic Brain Injury* (Millett-Gallant, 2013), a memoir about being congenitally physically disabled and experiencing traumatic brain injury. Millett-Gallant recounts her personal narrative, research on brain injury and art therapy, as well as disability studies theory. *The Disabled Body in Contemporary Art* (Millett-Gallant, 2010) is a volume that analyses the representation of disability in contemporary art in its various contexts, from art history to photography to medical displays in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Georgina Kleege is a blind Professor of English at the University of California, Berkeley, where she teaches creative writing. Both of Kleege's parents were visual artists. She has produced significant publications on the representation of disability in art and literature. Her recent book, *More Than Meets the Eye: What Blindness Brings to Art* (Kleege, 2018) addresses the history of blindness in visual art, museum accessibility, and the enriching experience of engaging with art beyond the sense of sight, proposing different sensory possibilities for non-disabled people to interact with and engage in art in museums and public spaces.

Carmen Papalia is a blind artist and museum activist, who uses performative strategies and improvisation to address his access to public space, the art institution, and visual culture. His socially engaged practice is an effort to unlearn visual primacy and resist support options that promote ableist concepts of normalcy, offering an alternative perspective on, and practice of, accessibility and public engagement in museums and art galleries.

With this method, I seek to address the socio-cultural diversity of academics and theorists who have developed activist practices in their professional relationships both inside and outside academia, in museums and artistic spaces. As a result, I achieve greater student engagement in critically examining their values and beliefs on issues related to human diversity.

On the other hand, another strategy I have been using in teaching education classes, museum professionals' workshops, and disabled community workshops and conferences to address issues of representation, inclusive museums, and human diversity is the collective creation of mind-maps. For this activity, I use images of artists involved in the disability-arts movement, curatorial projects related to disability, as well as descriptive texts, statements, keywords, and images of objects from collections that represent, were made by, or used by people with disabilities. I also provide large blank sheets of paper, cardboard, colored pencils, and post-it notes to support students and participants in developing their critical capacity to use the arts, aesthetics, and research to understand the role of the arts and different cultures in the social construction of disability over time.

As part of this effort, I direct students and participants to explore themes related to dilemmas inherent in the social oppression practised by dominant groups in Western culture and the marginalisation of disabled people, which persists in today's society. I divide them into groups, distribute the images to each group, and give them about ten minutes to discuss them, allowing them to search for information on the web, with me acting as a referee. After this stage, students and participants must paste their group's image onto the blank paper, along with keywords, titles, and related texts, giving them the design and form they feel should represent the content on the blank space.

I do not manipulate them to make them do what I ultimately want; instead, I provide them with their own platform to discover themselves in an activity where they curate the entire message they want to convey on the blank sheets of paper. Through this action, students and participants end up presenting new perspectives on disability and diversity by using the materials available. For example, one common outcome is the creation of wordplays and the asymmetrical arrangement of images to highlight the dichotomy between normality/abnormality; right/wrong; beautiful/ugly. Additionally, the analysis and discussion of the images allow other interpretive layers to be created and displayed on the blank sheets of paper.



Fig. 4. Construction of a mind map in a class on disability representation and disability-arts. Image: Patrícia Roque Martins

For example, one of the images I frequently distribute to students and participants is a work by disabled artist Mary Duffy, which serves as a paradigm of the 1980s disability-arts movement. In her piece *Cutting the Ties That Bind* (1987), Mary Duffy uses the model of the armless *Venus de Milo* to mirror her own biography, appearing nude with a white cloth that she gradually unwraps from her body. The significance of the title of her work has been reflected in the way students have reproduced it on the blank paper. Additionally, the images from the work have been arranged sequentially, as if in a film reel, reinforcing the artist's work as a political act of liberation, associated with the narrative of a biographical story integrated into the life experience of an atypical body.

Another recurring situation has been the connection between the works presented in the images and situations that reflect some of the civil society discussions related to the theme, which are currently in the public eye. For example, from the image of Marc Quinn's sculpture *Alison Lapper Pregnant* (2005), which depicts a pregnant woman without arms, analogies were drawn with the case of a disabled artist from civil society, *Devojka sa Krilima*, who, also without arms, recently became a mother. She was the target of harsh criticism on social media, with some questioning her right to motherhood.

Furthermore, the creation of these mind maps has led to reflection on the very concept of some contemporary artistic practices which, while not directly related to the theme of disability, highlight the power of minorities and the privilege of being born in a normative body. In doing so, students have moved the theme of disability beyond disability-arts, engaging with contemporary artistic practices committed to current social issues.

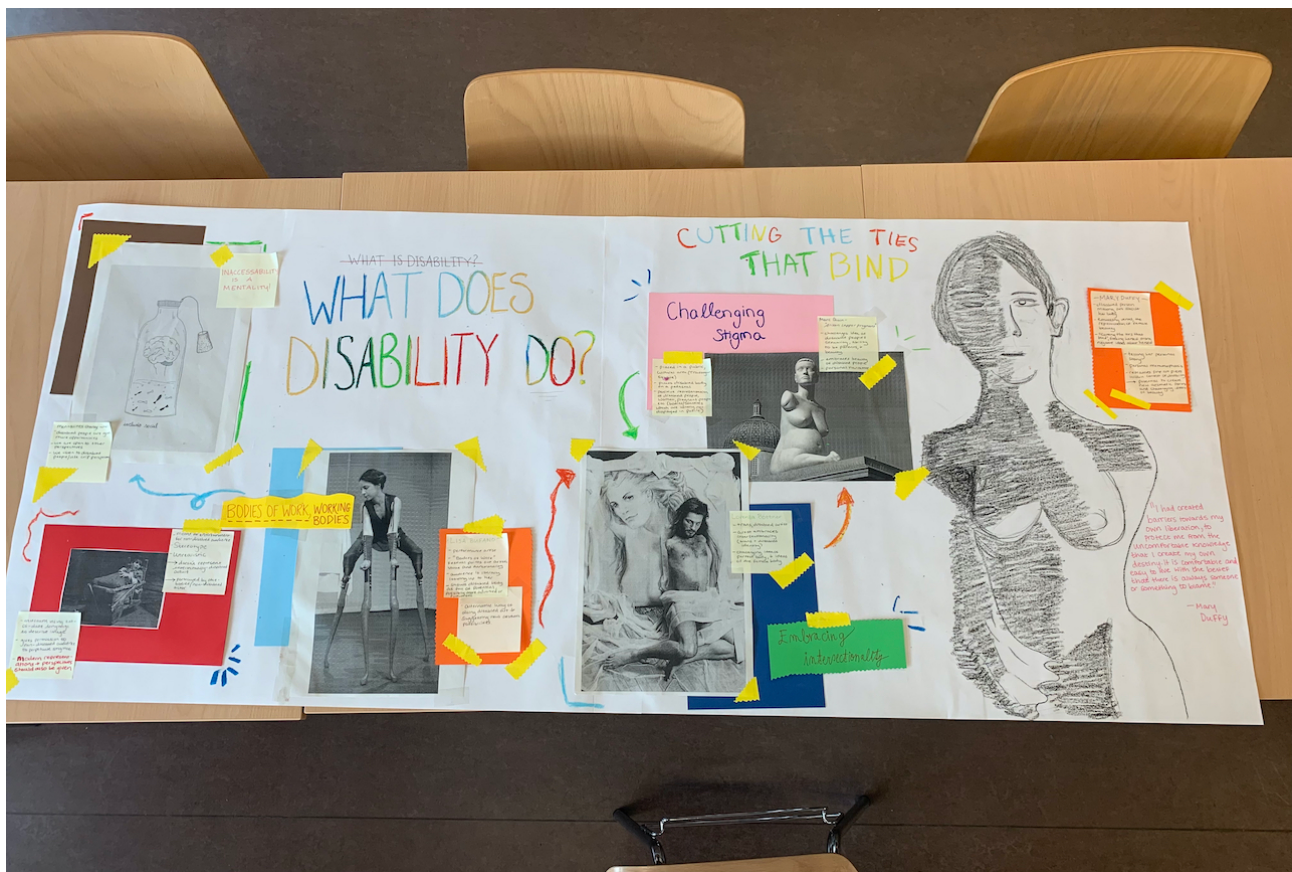


Fig. 5. Final mind map developed in a class on disability representation and disability-arts. Image: Patricia Roque Martins

One example of this was the work of artist Hans Hemmert, *Level* (1997), which enabled students to explore issues related to people of short stature. In this work, the artist created an installation that involved the participation of normative-bodied individuals in a public event. Platforms of various shoe sizes were provided so that every guest at the event measured exactly two metres tall, allowing participants of different heights to feel the same height, thus removing the “privilege of height.”

Another example is Cildo Meireles’ work *Imensa* (1982-2002), a structure made of iron, standing eight metres tall and composed of tables and chairs of different sizes and proportions, stacked in modules and imposing itself in relation to the (small) body of the viewer. At the same time, this installation defied all constructive logic, with the smaller, lighter pieces supporting the larger, heavier ones. In both cases, these works were cited by students during the construction of the mind maps, as they provoke reflection on notions of hierarchy, balance, social structures, and power.

It is in this spirit that I offer students the opportunity to think about disability in a creative way. By developing an activity that involves engaging with materials as a way of critically distancing from oneself—by entering a process of thinking about the meaning of human relationships and each person’s sense of seeking the other—the development of aesthetic considerations in the areas of design, relationships, and vocabulary formation are, indeed, facilitated.

As Blumenfeld-Jones (2010) pointed out, discovery arts and creative activities as a learning method are central to offering students a unique mode of learning that is not commonly found in our culture, which is often fixated on the scientific method. By doing this, I can awake in students their motivation to discover meaning about an idea or to develop cognitive knowledge through different means, accomplished around the idea of the body and senses.

6. Final Considerations

Reflecting on my positionality and intersectionality as a researcher in disability studies and being the daughter of a disabled father, I recognize the importance of acknowledging my personal experiences and its influence on shaping my research.

The oppressive nature of disability research has long been a concern within disability studies, with abled-bodied researchers often dominating the field and perpetuating oppressive paradigms. Embracing a biographic approach, I strive to avoid exploitation and ensure that the common daily oppressive experience of the lives of people with disabilities are central to my research, exploring new possibilities for acknowledging the complexities of identity in disability studies and museum representations (Inckle et al., 2023). Drawing on my biographical perspective, I aim to highlight previously silenced voices by exploring past events in my life that have shaped my understanding of disability and informed my research (Kafar, 2013). By grounding my

work and lecturing classes activities in personal experiences, I strive to demonstrate that science is practiced by living, culturally and socially located individuals, rather than abstract entities disconnected from the real world.

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