

CANADIAN JOURNAL OF

Disability Studies

Published by the Canadian Disability Studies Association · Association Canadienne des Études sur l'Incapacité

Canadian Journal of Disability Studies

**Published by the Canadian Disability Studies Association
Association Canadienne des Études sur le Handicap**

Hosted by The University of Waterloo

www.cjds.uwaterloo.ca

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Commentary

From the Comfort of Your Own Couch: Is the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's *You Can't Ask That* an Educational Documentary, or a 21st century Freak Show?

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A black box set. Bright spotlights on stands focus on two wheelchair users. The background is a white marbled photography screen. The program being recorded is *You Can't Ask That*. A woman introduces herself to the participants. "I'm Mariane," she says, "This is a conversation just between you and I (sic)." She indicates the spike tape on the floor to position the participants square-on to the camera, asks them to pick a question, and says "Answer the best you can." Look! ... the cameras are rolling. The participants don't know that their images are already being broadcast as they position their wheelchairs. The cameras are moving in for a close-up. The participants look directly into the camera but they can't see you at home! Step right up folks! Hey, you there! Yes, you with the normative body comfortably ensconced on your couch with a bowl of Lay's Salt and Vinegars in your lap. Ignore that queasy feeling. You know you want to stare! This is fascinating stuff! You might learn how they go to the toilet...oh! and the sex! This series is brought to you by the diversity promoting, inclusionary, and very politically correct, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC). And, if the CBC approves, who are you to be critical? Lights! Camera! Action!

Do we recognize a freak show when we're staring right at it? This is where my interrogation began. In 2019, the CBC launched *You Can't Ask That*, a new eight-part digital

series on its GEM format produced by Izabel Chevrier and written and directed by Mariane McGraw (Skinner 2019). The disabled participants, who represent a diversity of race, gender, and age, come from small towns and cities across Canada. According to the website, the documentary series, modelled after the “hugely successful” Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) production of the same name, “offers individuals whose lives are often marginalized or misunderstood the opportunity to speak for themselves and share their experiences, yielding raw, and often surprising, insights.” To that end, as the website explains, each episode invites the public to ask “a group of people with the same disability the awkward, inappropriate or uncomfortable questions you are too afraid to ask.” This explication of the first season of the series challenges the framing of *You Can’t Ask That* as an educational documentary and compares the series to the exploitative freak show of not-too-distant history.

It is important to understand that the use of the word freak in my analysis, a pejorative and repulsive slur when used to describe persons with disabilities, is used solely to underline historical context. It is also relevant to this discussion to disclose, that as a full-time caregiver for my husband who has late-stage Parkinson’s Disease, I write with a disability advocate’s lens. Further, as a person with non-visible disabilities, I also write with the lens of a disabled person. Still, it is neither my place, nor my intention, to dictate or judge how a person with a disability chooses to present themselves in the world. It is also key that the participants on *You Can’t Ask That* knowingly chose to put themselves in front of the camera and invited engagement with disability in this way.

As Soffer et al. find in their study, *Framing Disability Among Young Adults with*

Disabilities and Non-Disabled Young Adults, “persons with disabilities hold somewhat different meanings of disability compared with non-disabled persons” (171). This idea suggests that each of us frames an understanding of disability within a particular personal bias. The media representation of persons with disabilities on *You Can’t Ask That* also presents us with biased framing. This framing, as Entman writes in *Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm*, “involves selection and salience;” that is, some things are chosen, some are left out and some are given prominence (52). This is significant in the discussion because, as Doris Graber argues in *Content and Meaning: What’s It All About*, media “carry latent meanings derived from the setting in which the message was expressed, the symbols and connotations embedded in the message, and the experience of the message senders and receivers” (144). Just as the interest of respected scientists legitimized the freak show and gave it a “pseudo-scientific aura” that made good “advertising copy” (Bogdan 67, 62), so too, does being publicized as a CBC documentary lend legitimacy to *You Can’t Ask That*. Images of the show *The Nature of Things* are conjured. But, the display of disability on the series and the particularly ableist framing, adversely impacts the educational message even before the director says, Lights! Camera! Action! Although the series is publicized as a documentary, that is, objective, factual, educational journalism, rather, the ableist bias and exposed position of the participants creates a frame that adheres more to a reality show script.

Also, although *You Can’t Ask That* is described on the CBC website as unscripted, scripting is central to the framing of disability on the series. Certainly, if viewed uncritically, the series appears unscripted; for example, there are pauses, asides, and laughter. This casualness strongly gives an unscripted perception throughout each episode; nonetheless, this

is misrepresentation. Each episode is exactly 22:04. This timing exactitude suggests selective editing. As Entman explains, this form of post-production control, that is the aforementioned *selection* and *saliency*, allows the director to tailor the raw footage and create a particular narrative by favouring some shots, cutting others, and adjusting sequences (52). He adds, “to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient... in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (52). In *You Can't Ask That*, the “item described” is the disabled participant. As a result, the framing of the message is not in the hands of the participant, but rather in the hands of the CBC production staff. As Riley argues in *Disability and the Media: Prescriptions for Change*, the image of the participant is “controlled by the image maker, not by the one in the picture” (2). To illustrate, at various times within each segment, certain aspects of the message which McGraw wants to emphasize are highlighted in large text on the screen. In the “Wheelchair Users” episode, for example, a phrase spoken by Paul Tshuma, who has multiple physical impairments, is superimposed over his image in a sort of comical graffiti-style text: “I feel like I’m in a zoo.” In this way, almost certainly unintentionally, McGraw herself draws a parallel between *You Can't Ask That* and the now incomprehensible human zoos of the frighteningly not too distant past.

In addition, the way in which persons with disabilities are grouped in the series frames the discussion of disability and is integral to the script. The participants are not grouped, as the social model argues, as a minority facing attitudinal and physical barriers in a social context (Berger 61). Nor are they grouped as the cultural-pluralism model which defines disabled people as “multi-faceted,” and defers attention from their disability to portray them as people

(61). Instead, referencing the bio/medical model of disability, the participants are grouped according to their medicalized impairments. This bio/medical model defines disability as a “property of the individual body,” especially relating to medical diagnoses of physical, cognitive and sensory impairments (Sandahl 129). Particularly, the bio/medical model “individualizes disabled people by considering them unique, unfortunate victims of pathologies, rather than a group of citizens deserving of civil rights” (129). To illustrate, the episode titles on the opening frames are highly medicalized labels: “Wheelchair Users,” “Tourette Syndrome,” “Visual Impairment,” “Autism,” “Limb Differences,” “Little People,” “Down Syndrome,” and “Facial Difference.” It is only at the very end of each episode that participants state their name and the city in which they live. Therefore, from the outset, the viewer understands the participant only as a sort of synecdoche for their impairment. Adding to this, the viewer learns almost nothing of the participants’ complex lives as human beings.

The rare exception to this omission occurs only in response to a question pertaining to sexuality when an occasional participant, compelled to support their claim to being a sexual being, interjects a reference to a spouse or children. As a result of this lack, there is nothing to indicate that the participants contribute much to the world. McGraw’s decision to foreground each episode with a medicalized frame discounts the message of *people first*, and is reliant upon, and perpetuates, an outdated ableist message. This misinformation further erodes the series’ credibility as an educational documentary.

Despite decades of disability activism and persistent attempts to reframe disability as a social construct created by attitudinal and physical environmental barriers, as Sandahl writes “the dominant culture persists in considering disability in terms of the medical model” (129).

And, the dominant culture is ableist. As a result of this ableist bias, numerous questions on each of the eight episodes of *You Can't Ask That* — in one form or another — ask the participant: “What is wrong with you?” For example, persons with visual impairment are asked, “Why are you blind?” A question in the “Facial Difference” episode asks, “Why don’t you get surgery?” This “diagnostic gaze,” that is the abled person’s propensity to “scrutinize disabled bodies for aberrant symptoms” (Kuppers qtd. in Sandahl 130), is a result of the medical framing of disability. The disturbing by-product of this idea is that the life of a disabled person is not worth living unless the body can be fixed (Ellis et al. 21). This framing directly affects the view of disability as a “negative phenomenon” (Soffer et al. 171). In addition, there is a subtext of ableist fear in the unasked question — Can this happen to me? Furthermore, there is also a pernicious codifying demonstrated. As J.L. Williams argues in *Media, Performative Identity and the New American Freak Show*, historically, the abled have made distinctions between impairments acquired at birth and considered “monstrosities,” and those later acquired and considered “natural” (14). In other words, ableism understands disability as a hierarchy. The question, whether voiced or not, is intended, as Sandahl writes, “to affix a diagnosis to a disabled person, categorizing him or her as safely ‘other’” (130).

Moreover, the framing of disability on *You Can't Ask That* is almost entirely focused on persons with visible disabilities. According to the 2019 Statistics Canada report titled *The Dynamics of Disability: Progressive, Recurrent or Fluctuating Limitations*, “Disabilities are often invisible and episodic with people sometimes experiencing periods of wellness and periods of disability.” The report further states, “Of the 6.2 million persons with disabilities aged 15 years and over, 2.4 million (39%) experienced conventional continuous limitations

whereas 3.8 million (61%) experienced some type of disability dynamic. Despite these readily available statistics, aside from the “High Function Autism” episode which includes some participants of only slight manneristic and physical difference, the experience of persons with invisible disabilities, or those passing with ‘invisible’ disabilities, is absent. Therefore, the narrow ableist framing of disability on the series excludes a vast number of people in the disabled community.

Also, the media framing on *You Can't Ask That* invites questions of agency. Like a sleight of hand, the viewer is directed to what McGraw wants them to see — a false impression that the participants have autonomy in choosing the questions they want to answer. As described earlier, McGraw is filmed while she instructs the participants to pick any of the question-cards which are placed next to them. Yet, the participants' autonomy is a visual illusion. The questions have already been culled and edited behind the scenes. This false illusion implies that the power to discriminate, that is, to choose certain questions and eliminate others, is in the hands of the participants; however, it is not. Equally problematic, neither the participants nor the viewers, know from where these anonymous questions derive. The questioner is nameless and absent. This is most egregious because anonymity and invisibility contribute to what Suler refers to as the "online disinhibition effect," an effect that lowers social barriers and inhibitions (184). For example, when people respond anonymously and invisibly online without the consequence of face-to-face contact, their response is uninhibited compared to their offline behaviour (184). Consequently, the anonymous questions on *You Can't Ask That* give unknowing viewers the mistaken idea that these types of invasive questions are socially acceptable. More dangerous, the online disinhibition effect can be toxic

(184). Perhaps this is why, as Carly Findlay writes in her *Behind the Scenes* discussion of the ABC series, “The producers sent us all a lovely email a month before the season aired on iview, warning us against trolls, and advising us how to protect ourselves on social media.” Although trolling of persons with disabilities is on the rise (Ryan), it is unlikely that an educational documentary would require a warning or engender an atmosphere conducive to trolling behaviour.

Adding to this, although the anonymous disembodied questions handed to the participants of *You Can't Ask That* may have been vetted, similar to anonymous contributors of online platforms, there are no consequences for the unexposed questioner. There is a disturbing element of cornering that isolates the participant just as a bully does. This is because the unexposed questioner initiates the dialogue by deciding what question they will ask, thus creating an imbalance of control and power. This imbalance leaves the participants in a subjugated position, exposed to the unexposed questioner and the unexpected question. This could have been easily rectified if the questioners were made to identify themselves onscreen and if the participants themselves vetted the questions in advance. Arguably, altering the series script in this way would present a very different reality — a reality which better represents persons with disabilities. Instead, the constructed reality presented to the viewer on *You Can't Ask That*, is a composite of how the editor, and possibly the producer, chooses to frame and stage disability.

As Robert Bogdan writes in *Freak Show*, during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Barnum and Bailey's freak show exhibit was also widely accepted by the public. In 1906 when a newspaper printed the “Sad News” that the freak show would be discontinued

because “large numbers of letters criticized the exhibition of ‘human abnormalities,’” the show was “bombarded with sympathetic letters from irate side-show fans demanding the show stay open” (62-64). Yet, as Bogdan writes, “by 1940 the freak show was ‘on the ropes’” (67).

Although the crowd-pleasing freak shows of the past have finally been categorically denounced, nonetheless, as Pascal Blanchard writes in *Human Zoos: The Invention of the Savage*, “The ‘other’ has always sparked interrogation, puzzlement and amazement” (16). This is unchanged in the twenty-first century. It is apparent that the participants on *You Can’t Ask That*, similar to the circus freak show participants of history, are still considered “human curiosities” (Bogdan 25). As Rosemarie Garland-Thomson explains in *Staring at the Other*, staring is something we all do because “staring is the human response to novelty” (par. 1).

Consequently, a comparison can be drawn between *You Can’t Ask That* and the so-called freak shows of disability history — both involve staring. Effectively, the series is staged for staring, just as were human zoos and freak shows. Bogdan writes that “presentation” was often the “most important part of the exhibit” (258). Although there were sometimes elaborate stagings such as “jungle” motifs (106) and “Victorian parlour backdrops” (213), most exhibits were more basic. In *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self*, Leslie Fiedler describes one such display: “Most often they stand against a curtain on a draped platform, to which we have to look up” (283). The stark staging on *You Can’t Ask That* creates a striking similarity. Unlike most broadcast interviews where the interviewer and interviewee share an intimate space with a coffee table and comfortable chairs placed at an angle to the camera — and perhaps an artificial plant or two — those participants on *You Can’t Ask That* who do not bring their own (wheel)chairs sit on hard white stools without backs in the glare of stage lighting. They are

instructed to position their chairs on the stage markings so that they will face the camera straight on. Reminiscent of freak shows and human zoos, this framing seems particularly constructed for the viewer to get an unobstructed look, that is, for an unimpeded gawk at the participants. Facilitating staring, the camera person zooms in for close-ups. Significantly, the viewer can stare unchecked at bodies with difference in what Garland-Thomson terms “virtual staring,” because the participants can see neither the questioner nor the viewer. Garland-Thomson argues that the “staree,” a word which she coined of necessity because there was a lexical gap, often “directs” a staring encounter “because the staree is so much more experienced” in such encounters (8). “Indeed,” she writes, “accomplished starees often develop a repertoire of strategies they use to choreograph staring encounters” (8).

Illustrating this idea, on the “Little People” episode, Colin Moulton wears a t-shirt printed with: “Keep staring. I might do a trick”. Similar to what Garland-Thomson describes during face-to-face encounters, this t-shirt allows Moulton some control over the starrer and presents the starrer with the uncomfortable truth that they are staring. It is a stare-back. Yet, unlike face-to-face encounters, the “staree” on *You Can't Ask That* cannot see the starrer and is not in a position therefore to direct the interchange of staring. This “virtual staring,” as Garland-Thomson argues, changes the dynamics of staring. She writes, “first, it absolves the starrer of responsibility to the object of the stare; second, it eliminates the possibility of engagement between the two people in the staring relationship; third, it grants all agency to the looker and withdraws any agency from the looked upon; fourth, it renders the confrontation static” (par. 7). In other words, the absence of the starrer on *You Can't Ask That* negates the humanity of the exchange for the staree, that is, the person with a disability. This is important because, as

Erving Goffman argues in *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, this “means that *normals* will not have to admit to themselves how limited their tactfulness and tolerance is; and it means that *normals* can remain relatively uncontaminated by intimate contact with the stigmatized, relatively unthreatened in their identity beliefs” (121). This is magnified on *You Can't Ask That*; the comfort of abled persons is preserved and protected by anonymity at the expense of disabled persons.

Similar to the freak show, the starrer's fascination with the 'other' is also seen on *You Can't Ask That*. This inexplicable engrossment often borders on the scatological and the prurient. In an age where virtual interactions are common, as Garland-Thomson argues, “staring becomes an uneasy fusion of curiosity and voyeurism” (13-14). To illustrate, on *You Can't Ask That* there are multiple questions about sexuality and bathroom usage. In the “Little People” episode, for example, the question “How does sex work with full-size people?” is answered by tossing the card away with an *it's none of your business look*, as Dave Sousa says, “If you can't figure that out, your sex life sucks.” In the “Wheelchair Users” episode, in answer to a similar question,

Can you have sex? Peter McGregor says, “The short answer is yes. The long answer is call me later and we'll talk about how.” When the question “Can you shower yourself?” is asked, Maayan Ziv responds with incredulity and understandable annoyance, “I'm not sure why that's interesting to people. I really don't care how people go to the bathroom, but apparently, it's *fascinating* the way that I can shower and go to the bathroom. I don't know why.”

As a result of this fascination, freak shows, side-shows, and human zoos, which

attracted generations of voyeuristic gawkers, were highly lucrative enterprises, from local country fairs to the famous Ringling Brothers' Barnum and Bailey Circus (Bogdan 56). In *Seeing is Believing: America's Sideshows*, A.W. Stencell writes that "The art of showing something for profit starts with the story" (5). As discussed earlier, the story of *You Can't Ask That* promotes the series as a documentary intended for public education. This story gives the abled viewer assurance that asking the earlier described "awkward, inappropriate or uncomfortable" questions is acceptable behaviour. Staring, gawking, rubber-necking, goggling and gaping are thus sanctioned. This also aligns with the story promulgated by freak shows.

Bogdan writes that freak shows were, "advertised as healthy, instructional and scientific" (56), or in other words, as educational. Also, similar to freak shows which employed "talkers" or "barkers" who titillated passers-by to encourage better attendance (Stencell 5), *You Can't Ask That* has a trailer to entice viewers. Thus the CBC trailers include provocative questions such as Do you wear your prosthesis during sex? The CBC's use of the allure of the prurient for the market is far removed from documentary. Also, like freak shows, *You Can't Ask That* monetizes the story. Although the CBC is not a profitable corporation, the advertising revenues and subscriber fees to GEM contribute to the CBC's 2018/19 reported revenues of \$573.1M (Annual Report). As Riley writes, "one should not "neglect the dollars-and-cents dynamic that governs, to far too great a degree, what makes it to the screen and page" (1). Akin to the freak show of history, *You Can't Ask That* is a crowd draw for the CBC.

In *The Careers of People Exhibited*, Gerber, discussing freak shows, writes that Bogdan "generally assumes the willingness of people to become human exhibits" (45). Yet, Gerber argues that consenting to become marketable freaks cannot be simply categorized as

willingness (Gerber 52). He argues that the ‘choice’ comes from a complicated frame of mind and could be seen as either a cynical attempt “exacting some revenge on a hostile, insensitive world of ignorant suckers by exploiting their vulgarity and credulity,” or conversely “in terms of volition and unfolding purpose rather than oppression and victimization” (52). Most importantly, Gerber questions the historian “compromising himself by sitting in judgment of the choices made” (42). As Nancy Hansen suggests in her 2019 Stapleford Lecture, *Disability, Art, and Activism*, disabled persons were “barred from so many occupations, [freakery] was the one left and became their area of expertise.” Bringing this discussion back to the present question, one wonders, if the environment were inclusive and accessible, if attitudinal and physical barriers were eliminated, and if persons with disabilities had a media presence commensurate with their numbers, would the participants of *You Can't Ask That* consent to submit to these questions?

Just as Soffer et al. found in their earlier noted study, the questions about disability on *You Can't Ask That* can be grouped into five categories of inquiry: “disability as a deviation from ‘the norm,’ disability as inability, disability as something one needs to overcome, the role of the environment in disability, and disability as a negative phenomenon.” To illustrate, “disability as a deviation from ‘the norm,’” is demonstrated in the questions: What’s wrong with your face? Can you feel any emotion? And, why are you blind? “Disability as inability” is demonstrated in the questions: Can you shower by yourself? Can you read body language? and how many times a day do you walk into things or get lost? “Disability as something one needs to overcome” is demonstrated in the questions: How do you feel when someone says, ‘You’re an inspiration’? Can children with autism grow out of it? and Can you control your tic

if you put your mind to it? The “role of the environment in disability” is demonstrated in the questions: Do you care if people use the disabled toilet? What most sucks about being in a wheelchair? And Do you live in a tiny house with little tiny furniture? And finally, “disability as a negative phenomenon” — although nearly all questions asked can be categorized as having a decidedly negative bias — is demonstrated in the questions: Does the wheelchair ruin the romance? Do you ever wish that you were able-bodied? and will your condition get worse as you get older? However, most remarkably, despite the negative ableist implications in these themes of questioning, the participants expropriate the questions for their own purpose — and they do so with aplomb.

In each episode, the participants’ answers emphatically quash stereotypes while creating a real sense of pride and joy in various states of being. Over and over, participants declare that their disability is part of their identity, and especially, that they like who they are. For example, Drew Penner who has high-function autism says, “I like to be unique. I like to be who I am.” Jean-Luc Martel who also has high-function autism says, “Don’t conform. Don’t be a part of the herd.” Jason Helmond who has Down Syndrome says, “I am proud of it and about myself.” Each question, no matter how intrusive, was answered with intelligent candor. Of course, there was not always consensus. For example, when asked, “How do you feel when someone tells you, You’re an inspiration? Russell Winkelaar, a wheelchair user, responds with obvious frustration, “Wow. How much time do I have?” On the other hand, the earlier mentioned Ziv says, “That’s okay if it comes from the right place. Brushing my teeth in the morning does not make me an inspiration. Crossing the street. Not inspirational.” Peter McGregor says, “I can see both sides of why people would get uncomfortable with this argument, but I get positivity from it.”

Another question category that created disparate answers concerned questions that implied the need to fix the disabled person as demonstrated in the question, “Do you wish you had a different face?” Several participants answered with a direct “No,” while some had endured thirty and fifty surgeries. Keith Widginton answered that he would like “a reasonable facsimile of what [his face] was.” The answers often differed depending upon whether the person had been born with the impairment or acquired the impairment. The answers to many questions exacted a cost from the participants and caused visible emotional pain. For example, after answering the question “Aren’t you just odd?” Bruce Petherick, choking back emotion, admits, “It’s funny that question was very easy. [Pause.] But, very difficult.” Further to this, one of the most offensive questions in the series asks, “What names have you been called?” thus forcing a re-wounding as participants answer the question and relive the verbal assaults. Understandably, sometimes the questions elicit infuriated responses. To illustrate, when asked, Do you hate people? Martel answers, “This is the kind of question that pisses [people with autism] off and makes them hate you!” When answering, “Do you care if people use the disabled toilet?” Winkelaar responds, “I feel an immense rage.” Yet surprisingly often the questions are answered with humour. For example, when answering “Should I feel pity for you?” Stanford says, “Absofreakinlootely feel sorry for me.” Answering the question, “You must have had a tragic accident, right?” Verna Marzo who has multiple amputations says that she tells young children, “I had a fight with a dinosaur!”

In another amusing response, Chris Koch who is limbless and has what he calls a ‘button’ in place of fingers, asks one of the backstage personnel to push the button, whereupon Koch makes a loud noise like an electric spark. As the stagehand jumps back Koch laughs heartily at

his joke saying, “I’m a one-trick pony.” Particularly, throughout the series, there were numerous moments directed at educating the viewer. To illustrate, viewers were told to ask a visually impaired person if they want to be assisted to cross a street rather than to assume that they want help, that kneeling down to talk to a little person is condescending, that they should teach their kids about name-calling before they leave the house, that Little People do not want to be called the ‘M’ word, and that the abled should *never* use the disabled washroom stall. *Ever*. Especially, as Alexis Hillyard comments, sexual questions are “so inappropriate and so personal. These are things that are just for me and my partner. That’s what Google is for.”

Responding to the question, “A lot of parents are choosing not to have babies with Down Syndrome. How does that make you feel?” Nicholas Herd brilliantly says, “It’s wrong. It’s discriminatory. We want to be treated like everyone else on earth and not invisible.” At every turn, the participants challenge the unseen viewer to reconsider the stereotype. They do not allow the viewer to see them as victims. They do not allow the viewer to see them as objects of pity. They do not allow the viewer to see them as any more vulnerable than an able-bodied person. As David Connolly, a dancer/choreographer with one leg answered when asked, “Should I feel sorry for you?”: “No. Should you empathize with anyone who looks different? Yes. I’m walking around here with a secret and I know that everyone else is walking around with a secret, too.” Indeed. After watching the series, what is left is a real sense that society has gotten disability completely wrong; it is the able-bodied who are disabled by their attitudes. Deceased disability activist Harriet McBryde Johnson explained this succinctly when she wrote in *The New York Times Magazine*, “They think they know everything there is to know, just by looking at me. That’s how stereotypes work. They don’t know that they’re confused, that they’re really

expressing the discombobulation that comes in my wake.” As Garland-Thomson states in a 2015 interview with Alternate Anatomies Lab (AAL), “the human variations we think of as disability are part of the human condition.” It is past time for all humans to acknowledge this.

This interrogation began with a question — Is the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation’s series, *You Can’t Ask That*, an educational documentary, or instead, is the series a 21st-century version of the freak show? The answer, as can be said about most discussions pertaining to disability, is not a simple binary. Although the series can be lauded for creating a public space for the experience of persons with disabilities to be heard in the world, the framing of disability in the series is fraught with ableism. The questions asked are scripted, the participants’ answers are edited, and the participants’ physical images are co-opted for the ableist gaze. In addition, the series labels persons with disabilities according to their impairments, a dominant, yet discredited ableist construct of disability. Whatever the cause, this ableist framing represents a lack of understanding of disability. Yet, despite these essential flaws, the participants answered the questions with pride and an undeniably powerful presence, thus challenging stereotypes that have repeatedly and perniciously portrayed persons with disabilities as vulnerable victims, objects of pity, burdens to society, or the antipodal super-crip.

Significantly, what is changing in the twenty-first-century media representation of persons with disabilities is that persons with disabilities, such as the participants on *You Can’t Ask That*, are hijacking the dialogue. This dialogue, when it has not been missing entirely, has historically been controlled by an intransigent ableist media lens that misrepresents persons with disabilities. This is extremely important because the frequency and framing of persons with disabilities in the ubiquitous media— books, theatre, television, the internet, art, social media,

etcetera — affects how persons with disabilities are perceived (Ellis et al. 67). It is this perception that fortifies and affirms negative ableist attitudes, thus creating an exclusionary and discriminatory practice against persons with disabilities. The result is that persons with disabilities are excluded from participating in mainstream culture, are underestimated as a consumer force, are limited by external environmental barriers, and are patronized, bullied, and demeaned by ableist attitudinal barriers they experience regularly. And surely this model must have a profound devaluing effect on the self-image of persons with disabilities — an effect that can “undermine their performance and aspirations” (Zhang and Haller 322). As Chemers writes in *Staging Stigma*, persons with disabilities “are not expected to try to get [fully human] status, lest they be scorned for unnecessarily disrupting the social order” (14). That is changing.

Above all, the participants on *You Can't Ask That* have exercised what Garland-Thomson in that earlier noted interview terms “the privilege and obligation to say ‘I’”. In claiming that space, she argues, persons with disability “assert the right to be in the world.” In that same interview, she also argues, that just as “radical shifts of consciousness” have facilitated positive change for other minority movements, so too, are media representations in which persons with disability speak for themselves facilitating “radical shifts of consciousness” in the disabilities movement. Disability blogs and other forms of media are intercepting and interrupting hegemonic control and mainstream media framing. As Hansen conveys in her earlier noted lecture (2019), disability media is “shifting the lens from looking at someone as an object of sub-human curiosity to someone who is included in society as a whole.” Instead, disabled persons - are refusing to accept the status quo and are taking their place in a society where they have lived on the margins for too long. Hansen adds that persons with disabilities are “projecting

themselves in their own way and on their own terms.” There is power in story. As Amanda Leduc writes in *Disfigured: On Fairy Tales, Disability, and Making Space*, “It is time for us to tell different stories. It is time for a different world” (235). A review on the Accessible Media Inc. (AMI) website argues that the series contains a “powerful message.” It does. However, the credit for that powerful message does not belong to the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. On the contrary, the credit belongs to the participants who selflessly join a twenty-first-century freak show to transmit that powerful message.

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