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## Desiring and critiquing humanity/ability/personhood: disrupting the ability/disability binary

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### ABSTRACT

The authors take up the challenge of Goodley and Runswick-Cole's call to dismantle the ability/disability binary such that those now called 'disabled' can unproblematically join the ranks of those who will be counted as human. Using the methodology of collective biography, the six authors explore their own memories of becoming abled, and find in those memories a similar pattern of desire for, and critique of, humanness that Goodley and Runswick-Cole found in the participants in their own study, participants who were categorised as intellectually disabled. We turn to post philosophies to further develop the vocabularies through which the meaning of human can be expanded to include those who are currently viewed as less-than-human or other-to-human in their difference from the norm.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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### KEYWORDS

Ability; collective biography; posthuman performativity; binary thinking

### Points of interest

- In this article the authors use the research method of 'collective biography' to explore their first memories of how they became able, and were recognized as normal and human.
- We work with childhood photos to help open up our memories.
- We challenge the taken-for-granted division between the categories normal/abnormal, able/disabled.
- We argue that *everybody* is different, and that we all change and become able in different ways.
- We are all vulnerable and we all desire to belong in the same world, irrespective of the categories we are placed in.

Goodley and Runswick-Cole explore the desire of those categorised as disabled to live what they perceive to be a normal life, while at the same time “dissing” traditional understandings of personhood. They “trouble, reshape and re-fashion traditional conceptions of the human (to ‘dis’ typical understandings of personhood) while simultaneously asserting disabled people’s humanity” (2016, 2). In working on this double task of desire and deconstructive critique, and working interchangeably with the terms personhood, normality and humanity, they set out “to find new vocabularies in order to honour the humanness inherent in dis/ability alongside its disruptive potential” (Goodley and Runswick-Cole 2016, 1). Their end goal is to expand the concept of “human” to include those forms of human life that are currently separated out and treated as lying outside the norm and as even less-than-human.

In this paper we extend this line of thought. We focus in particular on the concept and practice of ‘ability’ and we drew on poststructuralist and new materialist concepts to generate those new vocabularies foreshadowed by Goodley and Runswick-Cole. To this end we engaged in a collective biography. In a three-day workshop in Ghent in Belgium, six of us told each other our memories of struggling to become able to do what was expected or demanded of us. Our stories tell of both precarious and hard-won abilities and of the loss of ability. Our end goal, along with Goodley and Runswick-Cole, was to expand the category of human in such a way that it does not exclude difference and, in particular, the form of difference currently categorised as ‘disabled’. We approach difference, not as categorical difference, but as differentiation or becoming. Taking up these poststructuralist concepts enables us to focus on what any of us might become, rather than on the constrictive practices of categorisation and the normative individualising concepts of personhood (Davies 2014; Davies et al. 2013; De Schauwer et al. 2016, 2017a, 2017b).

Goodley and Runswick-Cole define humanity in ways that they, and we, wish to stretch beyond. By human, for example, they say they mean “(normative) citizenship (associated with choice, a sense of autonomy, being part of a loving family, the chance to labour, love and consume ...” (Goodley and Runswick-Cole 2016, 3). The dis in dis/ability, they say, provokes a re-thinking of “*how we choose* to act, love, work and shop” (Goodley and Runswick-Cole 2016, 4, emphasis added). But “choice”, we will show, is too limited and limiting a concept. The powers any of us have to do and to be depend not just on the choices we make. Our powers to do and to be depend on the relational, systemic, epistemological, ethical and material assemblages that shape human lives. We do not exist independently of each other or of the world we live in. The very act of recognition, for example, changes who we are: “When we recognize another, or when we ask for recognition ourselves, we

are not asking for an Other to see us as we are ... Instead, in the asking, in the petition, we have already become something new ... It is to solicit a becoming, to instigate a transformation, to petition the future always in relation to the other" (Butler 2004, 44).

From a poststructuralist perspective, the act of rebelling against one's positioning from within a subordinated category is to solicit such a becoming, such a transformation. It is a petition in relation to the other and involves complex questions of ethics and responsibility (Davies 2008; De Schauwer et al. 2018). Human existence, in this conception of it, is both interdependent and emergent, and demands of us life-giving acts of acknowledgement, wit(h)-nessing and response-ability. As Holman Jones (2014, 363) says, "Our efforts to understand who we are, how we are situated in the world, and how we might be and become, are made possible, marked, enacted, and constrained by our interdependence with others." Without such acts, we can lose ourselves altogether, since there is no "I" that exists independent of that emergent relationality. The universe itself, as well as the human beings within it, "is made up of modifications, disturbances, changes of tension and of energy, and nothing else" (Deleuze and Guattari 1991, 76).

Thinking our way out of and beyond the binary categories that constrain us, which offer to some an (albeit precarious) human existence, and to others, savagely limited access, is not solely a task for those placed in the subordinated category of the ability/disability binary, though they often do most of the heavy lifting (De Schauwer et al. 2016; De Schauwer et al. 2018). It was the same in the feminist struggle. Boys and men found it difficult to see, let alone question, their own power and privilege. That difficulty was, and is, in part, because the dominant category of any binary pair signifies the normal, and the normative. Those in the subordinate category, in this case people who are labeled as disabled, need to light the fire again and again "as principal stakeholders and change agents at every stage of the process" (Mittler 2015). This is not an individual responsibility, we will argue, but responsibility entangled with multiple enlivening agencies that are simultaneously at play and affecting each other.

### **Entering a revolutionary space**

In any social revolution, then, where the members of a subordinated group are deemed to be lesser than the members of the dominant group, there is a problematic tendency on the part of the dominant group to assume its own unquestioned normality, through which its human status is defined. The difference from the subordinated group is integral to this assumption of normality. In any iteration of revolution the subordinated group wants what the dominant group has, or, is perceived to have. That was the desire of liberal

feminists—for individual women to gain access to whatever privileges men had. In any such binaries, the dominant group is generally *unmarked* (that is, not male or white or hetero or abled, just normal or human). The members of the unmarked group may, at the same time, as we have shown elsewhere, develop an intense desire to expel from themselves any features of the subordinate, marked group (De Schauwer et al. 2016). “The [unmarked] self in positioning itself against the other, constituting the other as negativity, lack, foreignness, sets up an impenetrable barrier between self and other in an attempt to establish and maintain its hegemony” (Barad 2014, 169).

Despite that barrier, which defends the dominant, unmarked positioning, each member of any dominant group knows themselves to be, potentially, on the edge of a precipice, or of multiple precipices, where the identifying characteristics of so-called normality can be lost. Any victim of trolling, or bullying, or sexual assault, for example, knows that precipice well. Further, any of us, at any time can lose our limbs or the use of them, can lose our language, or our citizenship, or our country, and any of us can lose our minds or some part of them. The list of risks to secure dominant positioning is endless. Quite apart from these omni-present risks, the training in the *desiring* of the normalised dominant position can be hard to overcome. Such training in maintaining one’s normative positioning and the abjection of anyone who does not achieve it are also omni-present.

We need revolutionary movements to counter and to challenge the dominant/subordinate binaries, and it is that revolutionary work in the critical disability sphere that Goodley and Runswick-Cole (2016) have initiated. They show how individual members of subordinated groups seek access to the normalised positioning taken up by the dominant, unmarked group. At the same time they critique the characteristics of the dominant group and celebrate the qualities of the subordinate group, just as radical feminists and crip theorists have done. The critique of the dominant group reveals the flaws and weaknesses in the dominant position. Revolutionary moves must go even further, deconstructing the binary itself, so that eventually the categories are no longer salient. Goodley and Runswick-Cole’s development of the concept of dis/ability initiates such a deconstructive move, though it is held back in part by the political necessity of hanging onto the category of disability.

Kristeva, Jardine, and Blake (1981) points out that all these revolutionary moves must co-exist, even while being contradictory. Each plays a vital part in bringing about significant change. The deconstructive move on ability/disability, which we take up here, draws on concepts from poststructuralism, posthumanism and new materialism. We put under erasure the very concept of the individualised, liberal humanist subject itself (Davies 2018) as we move from identity to differentiation and becoming:

The need to understand the self as implicated in the other, and identity formation as an ongoing process of recognition and acknowledgement, is a departure from an identity politics rooted in humanist, individualized conceptions of the subject. It is a departure from a consideration of self and subject position as stable, self-sufficient, and separate from others. It is, instead, a relational accountability predicated and dependent on our mutual vulnerability in and amidst a field of power. (Holman Jones 2014, 364)

In probing this radically different sense of what it is to be a human subject, a probing that Goodley and Runswick-Cole initiate, we see the development of a different sense of what it is to be human: all of us are enmeshed and entangled with each other, and with the world. Haraway (2016, 4) expresses the complexity of this “relentlessly becoming-with” where “we require each other in unexpected collaborations and combinations, in hot compost piles. We become-with each other or not at all. That kind of material semiotics is always situated, someplace and not noplacement, entangled and worldly”. Our stories utter one another, as do the entangled systemic, institutional practices in which much of our lives are embedded. The violence and normative power of those institutions are deeply relevant to the processes of exclusion and subordination (Davies 2005). They work through bodies, through things, through language and through ethics: that is, they are ethico-onto-epistemological. We are each integral to assemblages that are much more powerful than our individual selves. Our subjectivities are in motion and are multiple; they involve a contingent, “iterative performativity” (Barad 2014, 174). “It is through specific agential intra-actions that the boundaries and properties of the ‘components’ of phenomena become determinate and that particular embodied concepts become meaningful” (Barad 2003, 815).

### ***Collective biography as an emergent and intra-active methodology***

The methodology of collective biography (Davies and Gannon 2006) works hand in hand with the re-thinking of what it means to be human that we are undertaking here, since its focus is on the emergent subject in relation to others, not separate from others, but integral to the collectivity of human existence:

We do this work through speaking and writing to each other, listening to each other, and being heard, in a dynamic engagement with our research question and with the readings we have assembled. Each participant is not remembering and representing a self as it really was in some fixed state, but the mo(ve)ments encapsulated in particular memorable moments of being. (Davies and Gannon 2012, 371)

Our memories, in this case our memories of being recognised as able, are singular in their initial telling, yet they become collective through working

together, through using our stories to tap into the assembled forces that are at work on human lives. Paradoxically, the more we work to make those forces visible, the more vivid become the material specificities of each memory. At the same time the intra-active process of the workshop, and of the later collaborative writing, means the stories become a response to being listened to—their telling intra-acts with the stories of the others, affecting and being affected by each other's memories. The memories are, further, collective insofar as they have been evoked by the shared topic the participants have chosen to work together on. The memory stories are collectively situated in the space-time of the workshop itself: the shared photos, the physical setting and the affective bodies working together and writing together. Through such telling and listening and re-writing the memories remain intensely personal while becoming collective through working together in the assemblage of the collective biography. It is in narrating our stories, listening to each other, in witnessing and acknowledging each other, that what it is to be human in these ways emerges; our very material specificity making visible the forces at play on all of us—not just all of us in the workshop, and not just Goodley and Runswick-Cole's "dis/abled" participants, but all of us caught up in the human condition.

The team of authors involved in this project consists of six differently abled persons, all of whom have experience of being placed in subordinated categories, such as girls, women, non-native English speakers, and colonial subjects. The topic we had set for ourselves to work on was to re-think 'ability'. During the days of the collective biography workshop we created a safe context through patient and respectful practices of emergent listening (Davies 2014). The week of working together was like a dance; we took up positions and movements, switched those positions and movements, sometimes leading, sometimes following. Our search for what we meant by ability was like pursuing a multi-headed Hydra. What it meant to be human, could not be seen all at once; we would think we had it, and then something equally compelling and different would pop up, revealing itself in the multiplicity of affects, uncertainties, associated stories and multiple identities emergent in our storying. What it is to be human, we found, is multiple, fluid and indeterminate. As Barad (2014, 176) says: "This play of in/determinacy, unsettles the self/other binary and the notion of the self as unity. The self is itself a multiplicity, a superposition of beings, becomings, here and there, now and then. Superpositions, not oppositions."

We began the workshop with photos we had brought with us from our own childhoods that evoked memories associated with ability. We wrote the stories down, read them aloud and then rewrote them. We built up conversations around every picture/story. We found the photos to be deeply evocative. There was so much information in each one; the longer we looked at



them, the more they affected us and affected the ideas we were pursuing. Writing down our own memories in conjunction with photos helped us immerse ourselves in the mo(ve)ment of each memory; it enabled us to re-live that one particular mo(ve)ment, to discover how it felt in our bodies, in relation with the materiality of those particular spaces. The photos also helped us to avoid moral judgement, one of the significant precepts of collective biography work. We experimented with switching perspectives; re-writing our stories from the perspective of another person in the photo. It was almost shocking how new details from lost memories could emerge in this way.

After the workshop we went further with the question: how does the material we have produced contribute to our thinking about ability? We relistened to all the conversations which we had audi-recorded to experience again and revisit the discursive and material forces in our stories on ability and what they had opened up. We chose the stories for this paper that would enable us to gather together our emergent insights and extend them. Our question became not 'what is ability' but 'what is intra-acting to generate what will be recognised as ability'. 'Intra-action' is Barad's (2007) concept, suggesting not the meeting of two independent entities, but the mo(ve)-ments through which we affect others and are affected. In our re-turning to ability, we open up intra-active spaces of entanglement where humans, discourses, values and spatial-material elements affect each other. We explored the mo(ve)ment by mo(ve)ment production of ability and the way it is made to matter.

### **Passing as abled, passing a borderland**

Diving into our own memory stories we catch ourselves in a struggle to 'pass' as being abled. We find ourselves presenting ourselves as normal in order not to be considered abnormal, stupid or incapable. To be seen as abled implies having passed the borderland into a space that capable, autonomous and respected citizens inhabit. Thinking through how ability works on and through us brings us closer to the forces and discourses that work on us: the pressure to fulfill the expectations such as passing as 'good girls', 'a good swimmer', 'a good biker', 'a smart sister'. We learn to manage and organise our lives to belong and fit in. Our passing depends on the possibility of pretence and covering up incompetence. We learn to hide uncertainty, interdependency and fear. Goffman describes passing as: "the management of undisclosed discrediting information about self" (1963, 42 in Kanuha 1999). The 'mis-fits' try to conceal their differences in order to belong. We try to fit, as well as we can, the ideal of the good-looking, working, high-functioning, healthy, neo-liberal citizen (Kanuha 1999). We



experience stress and pressure in striving to pass as abled. In our memories we found ourselves continually trying to pass as a rightful member of the ascendant category (De Schauwer, Van de Putte, and Davies 2017, 2017b). We cover up, we pretend that we are able in order not to be confronted with the monstrous not-I that we have expelled from ourselves. We become skilled in order to fulfill the unspoken expectations of society and to negotiate them. We don't simply strive to fulfill existing expectations, but we learn also not to be satisfied with being 'good'. We strive to become the 'best' and to excel. Such striving is normative in neoliberal organisations in which each individual is pitted against others, not everyone will be counted as good enough, no matter how they strive. The normative power and forces run through our veins. We assimilate and internalise the material-discursive practices as Kanuha (1999) suggests, and sometimes we resist these same practices. "What is real is the becoming itself, the block of becoming, not the supposedly fixed terms through which that which becomes passes" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 238). It always remains unclear to whom or what the negotiation is directed. It is clear, however, that we experience a striving to belong and to feel recognized. This recognition is not 'ordinary'. This recognition appears to be shared, playing an important part in everybody's life. This becomes even more clear when taking disability as an entrance point. What does this category mean? Looking at ability makes us aware how the struggles, although with different outcomes and different impact, are familiar to all of us. We are all part of these ableist tensions.

## Memory stories

### *Look what I can do!*

The first story brings us to the beautiful garden, where a six-year-old child learns to ride her bike with the help of her grandmother. This is followed by another remembered moment in a second story where the position and abilities between the persons involved are reversed.

*I press my tongue between my lips and focus on the middle of the handle bars. As long as it is in a straight line with the wheel I am doing good. Grandma is still running after me. In the corner of my eye I see grandpa with the camera. I am still doing good, a couple of meters away already! I see the grass moving underneath my feet. From the corner of my eye, I see the flowers passing by. Would grandma still be there? Running behind me? Should I dare to look quickly? while thinking, I turn my head to the side. Grandma is standing a little bit further away with her arm still gently stretched as if still pushing me. Her elegant fingers are kindly spread as if they say "you will be okay". I'm on my own. I see how the middle of the handle bars is not parallel with the wheel any more. It wiggles around and the bike leans to the left, I pull right with all my strength and cannot slow down while I see grandma's garden with flowers and bamboo coming closer and closer.*

*My bike drives into it, finally limiting speed when the bamboo sticks come across the spokes of my front wheel. I fall, and my head is among the little purple flowers grandma grew so carefully. I feel sad while thinking about how grandma would have knelt down to plant them, as if she was putting jewels in the ground. But it is grandma's own fault. She said she would not let go of the saddle. I lift my head only to see the beautiful purpleness – shattered by my clumsiness. I do not look at grandma's face while I feel her arms lifting my small incompetent body. I am too afraid that grandma's mouth will be a line. No more biking today.*



The girl in this story wants to be a good, competent girl. She presses her tongue between her lips in the attempt and desire to fulfill the expectation laid down for her and by her. The girl has turned six, the time is ripe for learning how to ride. It's one of those mile-stones in life, that comes together with expectations (learning to walk, to ride, to swim, pass tests, have a diploma, get married, have children, have a permanent job...). We all participate (sometimes) in (some of) these normative events because we are all affected by cultural ideas of normalcy and ideal functioning. Normative (educational) discourses work on all of us deciding what we should be able to do at an appropriate age and creating outlaw ontologies

(Baker 2002). It is not only a matter of choice and desire to learn. Step by step the discourses are recruiting and embodying us, as we repeat “the language that maintains ableist normativity” (Baker 2002, 663). The girl’s body has capacities to produce a normative abled subject, but it demands hard work to become able or competent. It costs a lot of energy to perform but also to know what you should or should not do, to continue, to stand up again when you’ve fallen and hurt yourself, to try again, over and over again. The expectation and desire to fulfill a task demands the taking of risks and having the courage to experiment – to bike alone, to lose your balance, to fall down, to stand up, and try again. If you cannot, you will not have the opportunity to expand yourself in intra-action with the materiality of the bike.

Becoming a competent biker is seen as an individual accomplishment. It’s that individualisation of ability that gives the pressure and brings in the judgment against the standards. But am I good enough? When the girl realises that she is doing it alone, this confident space immediately collapses. Now neoliberal discourses constitute us as hyper-individualised subjects in competition with each other. We learn to overlook our dependence on others and strive against the odds, as if all agency depended on our own will and effort. We want to be in control and to avoid the tears running down our cheeks, the bars being held unsteadily, our body ending up in purple flowers. Is the girl controlling the handle bars and/or is she being controlled by the iterative lines of descent which demand of her that she repeats the mo(ve)ment once more, risks failure once more, and above all learns to perform, and to know herself, as an autonomous subject?

We desire the hegemonic category of becoming the ‘abled biker’ because of the recognition that comes along with it. We persevere because of the promise of the picture showing you biking on your own, the pride in the eyes of the grandma, the ‘bravo’ that will follow ... The recognition lies in the encouragement of the grandma and the grandfather who is ready to capture this big moment with the camera. It comes together with high expectations that the girl will be able to fulfill the norm and bring the activity to a good end. We desire to be seen (‘look, look, look what I can do’), to be acceptable. The recognition and pleasure in the competence of riding are worth the struggle and efforts, eventually. The biking girl, the fallen girl, the proud girl and the shamed girl co-exist.

All abilities are multiple, not fixed, emergent, and open, not just to being gained, but also to being lost. It is common place to lose your sight and have to get glasses, or to lose your hearing and have to get hearing aids, or to lose some of your mental acuity and be advised to do cross word puzzles or brain gym to keep your mind ‘active’. With a lot of attention and work, you can still pass as a normal human being. But that capacity can be lost and that experience is devastating.

*I enter the room and see four beds. When I scan my eyes across the beds I see Grandma. Grandma is very small. She lifts her fragile head, maybe she heard somebody entering the room. My feet stop on the doorstep, the cold door handle in my hands. Our eyes meet. I see two tears run down her skinny cheeks. Grandma, my wonderful Grandma who taught me to ride, turns her face away and looks guilty, as if she was caught on the wrong moment and knows she is not doing well. She buries her head in her long bony trembling hands and starts to make sobbing sounds. My feet awake and I rush to the other side of the room trying to find out what is making her so distressed. I notice she tries to cover something in her blanket. Grandma had spilt her yoghurt all over her pyjamas, her blanket and her cushions. And there is a smell. I can see grandma smells it too and is searching for the cause. Wringing her hands over the blankets, under the blankets, over her pyjamas. "They gave me a dirty blanket". While I lean over, trying to stop the yoghurt from flowing down to grandma's legs, I see where the other smell comes from. I take grandma into my arms that feel too big. 'They are coming to wash you, it is going to be okay'. Grandma only says: 'Look at your foolish grandma, look at what she has become'.*

What intra-actions and agential cuts impact on the leap from 'the grandma gently giving way' to 'the grandma needing guidance'? Both are behind the bike. Both are in the hospital bed. They enter into composition with the biking girl, the fallen girl and the girl standing by the bed, all together impacting on what their bodies can do in their multiple entanglements. When the grandmother's hand is gently giving way, the incompetent body of the granddaughter can be lifted; when the grandmother hands are bony and trembling, the granddaughter can embrace them. They are being cut-together-apart. When the granddaughter fell and saw the shattered little purple flowers, she was feeling ashamed, guilty and incompetent. The same feelings of shame and foolishness dominate the story of the grandmother. How did they end up there? Which agents in past, present and future intra-act within this spacetime-matter-ing where this girl blames her small incompetent body and the grandma covers her head in her trembling bony fingers? It becomes an intergenerational story of multiple becomings and shifting subjectivities. The biking girl, now a woman, is recognised as, and becomes, the one who can help.

### **Tackling the black run in one week – being raised above and being recognized as a competent skier**

This story take us to the memory of a 12-year old girl on a school ski trip. The girl is gathering together with her classmates and ski teacher Réne. They are trying to take THE beautiful picture of the best skiing group of the school, for their future photo albums. It is connected to an earlier photo of the girl when she was four. She is on a family day trip in the forest and felt the expectation to be a brave scouts girl, even if her dress is not really suited for the occasion. Those two memories will give us a glimpse of the intra-active process that produces ability: it is discursive, relational and material.





*Takatakataka. The seat passes. René looks surprised "What's the matter. Is it your ski, is it not fitting?"*

*Inge: "No, it's ... "*

*René: "Go, you know what I said yesterday, I never saw somebody so talented. So if I say you can do it, you can do it. Come on, go!"*

*Inge: "But I ... "*

*René: "No buts - just jump on the ski lift."*

*There she goes. Takatakataka. She feels her bottom on the small seat, she holds her hands firmly on the chain. Will she be able to do this? Can her body pull this off? Can she control her body to stay on track? What if something happens with her jacket? Her mother will not be able to re-sell it. There is no turning back. There is only one way. She has to think how thrilled her father will be, when he hears that his little girl, his scouts girl did the highest slope. It is for the best that her mother doesn't know it, it will be one of their secrets.*

*She is almost there. She knows that she has to jump quickly. She whispers to herself: "Focus, don't close your eyes, just focus and then follow the track. One, two, three... jump." There is the silence of being alone on top of the ski slope, surrounded with lots of white snow. She is a bit disorientated, where is the track? Teacher René waves to her and smiles: "Hi, there is our little girl. Yeah, here you go. Do you see the signs? Yes? Just follow them." She takes a deep breath, there she goes.*

*Slush, slush. She is surprised to feel how in control her body is and how light it feels. She is in a bubble, she and the snow, she and the mountain, no sounds, no time to hesitate. She feels the rapture of going down. The wind and the cold affect her cheeks. She feels warm. She can only focus on the track and long for the finish. She can only think of the right position to stop. "Knees together, bend forward, yes, yes there it is." She manages to slow down and stay straight while she turns to the right and stops. René passes her. He makes a slide and smiles: "Come on we go again".*

The performance of the girl can easily be seen as an individual accomplishment. It's the girl who rides up to the top of the mountain and goes down at full speed. It's in the enunciation of the teacher: *'I never saw somebody with so much talent.'* It's about taking up a confident pose and smile into the camera to capture 'the best group of the school'. But the story also unfolds that ability emerges in the moment, in intra-action with others. The ski trip materialised a net of discourses that produce this 'abled-competent-adventurous' girl. It is the cultural and social force of sending 12 year olds on a skiadventure. Those children are challenged by being away from home and taking up a dangerous activity that is way out of their comfort zone. Even though this trip requires a large (financial) investment, the parents of the girl want their daughter to participate in this event, so she can be seen as the normative subject. The girl got the proper clothes, attributes and ski equipment to produce and enhance her ability to become this normative subject. In this story, ability is not only put in the individual body but is also transformed into an individual talent. The parents desire that the child is exceptional and surpasses existing expectations. They wish no ordinary performance: the child needs to excel at her own performance and in comparison with other classmates. The girl is recognized as 'the talented girl' and this affects her position and possibilities. The girl without previous experience will and must take the highest ski slope.

The picture shows the girl as a competent skier, the picture doesn't show the anxiety, where the memory story does. The moment to go in line to the skilift, is the moment that the girl becomes conscious of what is happening. She can feel the specialness of the performance and feels the expectation to keep going. She cannot go forward, but her hesitation is overruled by the ski teacher whose job it is to produce this normative subject: *'If I say you can do it, you can do it.'* Those words contrast with the feeling of paralysis and doubt. Is she competent to perform from the beginning as a member of the best group? Can she fulfill the promise of the most talented girl? It is her body that captures the ambivalence of both feeling competent AND non-competent. However, there seems only space to engage in the routine of clicking boots, putting sun glasses on and lining up to go up with the lift. These material forces intra-act as the rhythm of the ski lift that is dictating to her it is time to go up. The terror of the lift pushes her to a precipice, literally and figuratively, tearing her away from things she knows she can do, toward new things that seem too adventurous. The entanglement of the girl - the lift - the outfit - the mountain ahead - the cold - the teacher - the other girls ... pushing her toward danger and to the chance to excel. The situation forces her to go on, making her smell the freedom of going down the hill at full speed, without support. She can meet the standards and can cross the border of exceptionality into the space that the (uber)capable inhabit. What is this thing about ability that is never satisfied? Is it like fighting the Hydra? The

more heads you cut off, the more grow back? We wonder how this 'dragon', this inner voice, becomes part of our self-judgement. Contradiction is part of excelling: the girl enjoys the attention and ski-ing and stands proud in the picture, close to her teacher René, while at the same time she feels hesitation in her body about delivering what is expected. She is scared of ruining the suit, and spoiling the possibility of her mother selling it afterwards, she is scared of the height of the mountain, of the skilift, and of not knowing how to stop. Different discourses are working on and through the body of the girl. A body that holds tight to her sticks, that tries to be careful so her ski jacket remains intact, that goes down the ski slope, light as a feather. It is connected to another story: "It matters what thoughts think thoughts. It matters what knowledges know knowledges. It matters what relations relate relations. It matters what worlds world worlds. It matters what stories tell stories" (Haraway 2016, 35). The girl on the mountain is connected with the girl many years before, who was required by her father to become his adventurous girl. It is a citational chain throughout her becoming-girl-woman. It works unwittingly, it continues to work on her over and over again.





*The car stops. The motor is still running but the little girl is already out of the car, together with the dog. She feels the sun on her cheeks and she smells the forest. Yes, she loves it! She starts running but her mother calls her back to put on her boots. Her body stops and follows the command. She runs back. Mother: "Please hold still and be careful with your dress. It's the dress that grandma bought in Spain. Ok?" No answer from the girl. There she goes again chasing the dog into the forest.*

*Mother: "Please stay on the track, stay on the track. Hector where is she? Go after her!"*

*Father: "She will be alright". He orders the sisters to come out of the car. They all walk into the forest. The girl is jumping from one stone to another stone, and steps further away from the path.*

*Mother: "Come back. NO, don't climb, you will fall. Oh, yes right take a picture of her."*

*The girl smiles into the camera. Her eyes sparkle, her feet neatly next to each other, a few centimeters from the ground, with her small hands she clings to the roots of the tree.*

*The father takes up his little girl, whispers into her ear 'you are my scouts girl' and puts her back on the path. He gives her a little push and she runs as fast as she can after the dog.*

It's the father's encouragement – the soft push to go, the whispering in her ear, registering this with a camera – that offers a counter-discourse to the mother's protective discourse that would keep her safe through generating anxiety about risk-taking. The contrast is materialised in the image: the dark, muddy sand and the very white dress. The dirt on her knees reveals the impetuous girl who is at the same time that anxious girl, who will take the black ski slope some years later. The 'adventurous girl' becomes a theme in the girl's life, jumping into adventures and only afterwards figuring out what the consequences and risks are.

### **Go and help your sister – focus on fragility and support**

*The girl is twelve. She's in her sixth grade of primary school and her father is her teacher. She is playing tag in the playground with her friends. Her father/teacher approaches her. Unlike his usual loud way of talking, he's being subtle now. He demands of her, quietly, "You go inside to help your sister, she's doing a test and she'll need some help." He looks around the playground as if to make sure no one could hear him asking this. The girl gazes at him. He is impressive in his requests. She does not dare to protest. She feels a sort of excitement. Her body wants her to obey as soon as possible. Her father/teacher trusts her with this assignment. If he believes she can do this, she must not fail him. Without saying anything, she proceeds to go inside the school building. The others in the playground won't ask any questions. They know she's the daughter of the teacher. So, they will probably think she had to get something for him. She sneaks inside the school building by passing a large green door with a little opaque window in it. The door is heavy. She doesn't look back as this might make somebody want to know what she's doing. Fast and supple she goes*

*inside. It's very quiet. There's nobody else. On her right she enters the long white hallway. The classroom is on her left side. Her sister is sitting there. Now she's with her sister, emotions of care and concern come up and trouble her. She recognizes what it means to be anxious about failing and to experience disappointment at not doing/being good enough. There would be no anger nor any punishment. But how to prevent the atmosphere of tension and the unstoppable tears from falling? The feeling of rushing and the excitement of fear of getting caught won't ebb away. At the same time, she's confident her teacher/father will make sure she and her sister can move on without any barriers. The sister looks at the girl, her big green eyes directed right at her. Bambi-eyes, the girl always calls them. The eyes of a beautiful deer always ready for flight. They are appealing to her. Somehow this brings in lightness and calmness. They need to start working together in a small bubble of attention and focus.*

In this story we recognise multiple forces coming together: the father being a father and doing the best he can, although breaking the rules, to give his children all the chances they can get. He is a father/teacher, teacher/father, father ... never just a teacher here. The multiple positionings with their contingent, iterative performativities illustrate their unexpected ways of moving. The girl who is getting help has asthma and is often sick. She has missed lessons so her chances of meeting the normative 'standards' has decreased. She is at risk of falling below the expected norm of her group. The test functions as a boundary-making practice deciding which space you can inhabit, what life directions you will be able to follow. "Boundary-making practices, that is, discursive practices, are fully implicated in the dynamics of intra-activity through which phenomena come to matter" (Barad 2003, 822). The norms and values of home are prioritized over the norms and values of school, where the girl would potentially be punished for cheating. A father is asking his daughter to cheat. A father is asking his daughter to help her sister. A father is trying to help his youngest daughter to manage in a stratified school system. A father/teacher is questioning the system by breaking the school rules. A teacher/father is making the girl obey him. It is a risky quest for all of them. But the vulnerability of the girl is worth the risk. The father is depending on his daughter to help her sister. It's a strange crossing over that the borderland is bringing them to. According to Barad we are responsible for the cuts that we help enact: "It's all a matter of where we place the cut ... different cuts produce different matters" (Barad 2007, 348).

The girl feels able when her father singles her out: she is needed and that is important for her own becoming. Her father is making her do something that is 'against the rules' striving for her sister to escape the fixed organization of school life and the violence of competitive testing. It is a way of saving her from an out-lier ontology where her future possibilities would be jeopardized. On the other hand, he is also forcing her to fit within the system, to make sure she can find her way in it. Is he a rebel? Or is he trying to normalize the possibilities for his daughter?

There is a rebel in me – the Shadow-Beast. It is a part of me that refuses to take orders from outside authorities. It refuses to take orders from my conscious will, it threatens the sovereignty of my rulership. It is that part of me that hates constraints of any kind, even those self-imposed. At the least hint of limitations on my time or space by others, it kicks out with both feet. Bolts. (Anzaldua 1987, 16)

The rebel is inside/outside, sometimes hidden behind the scenes, sometimes very active and visible. The rebel crosses the borderland. The rebel is half and half, passing as a proper school teacher, passing as a devoted father, *mita' y mita'*, “a deviation of nature that horrified, a work of nature inverted. Is it not about the magic aspect in abnormality and the so-called deformity?” (Barad 2014, 174). The sister is like the girl/unlike the girl, becoming the same, becoming different. The sisters, depicted in the photo, are becoming different through becoming the same. The little sister is looking up at the older sister; they are giggling together, giving unconditional support to each other.



They are crossing borders constantly. They are aware in the classroom they are crossing a boundary that shouldn't be crossed: this is cheating. Still, the home values and the family love are emerging as much more important at this moment for the father and the girl. In that spacetime mattering they both inhabit the borderland that is inhabited by the prohibited and the forbidden (Barad 2014, 179). The deformity here lies in the ethical disruption of the dominant discourse. Who and what comes to matter in this story?

The sister matters, the father, the test, the strategies to play the system and to accomplish what matters to the father. They are disrupting the binary, not ending up in the 'shadow region' where difference is constituted through practices of 'apartheid'. They are taking up the concept of difference

as a creative way of questioning the dominance and power of the testing (Barad 2014). In a posthumanist account the story illustrates the complexity of phenomena. Ability shows itself in complex compositions where the father, the two girls, the school, the teacher, the testing, ... shift places and impact, shift desire and becoming in a constant reiterative process.

### **(In)conclusion**

We have shown how passing as abled and as normal depends on the illusion of having accomplished once and for all, through one's own efforts and in one's own body, the required standards of performance for being recognised as a normal/normative human being. Passing, and the mo(ve)ments of being and becoming that enable one to pass as abled, create the illusion that we are individual agents, with choices and control over our lives, and that it is through our own inherent virtues that we come to be seen as belonging in the dominant group of the abled. Our stories reveal the contingent nature of our passing, contingent upon the support and beliefs and practices of others; contingent upon a shared habitation of an ethico-onto-epistemological world in which some will be counted as abled, and thus as recognisably human, while others will not. We are all at risk of losing our membership in the dominant category of the abled, and we sometimes, even routinely, take terrifying risks to keep ourselves there.

We have shown how the intra-active and emergent nature of one's competences are largely hidden from view. For those who do not succeed in being recognised as one of the abled, the fault is thus constituted as entirely their own. Goodley and Runswick-Cole wrote about the desire of those deemed to be intellectually disabled, to participate in "normal" human lives. We have found that same intense desire in our own stories, suggesting that it is an entirely normal (and normative) human desire. At the same time we have shown that the ways in which ability is individualised and normativised places everyone on a precipice of potential exclusion, and abjects those who have not found the means of passing.

The simultaneity of the desire for membership in the dominant category of the abled, and the urgent necessity of deconstructing what will count as human permeates our own stories of ability just as it permeates Goodley and Runswick-Cole's disabled' participants stories. Drawing on the thinking of philosophers such as Barad, Butler and Deleuze we have drawn attention to the shared mobility, relationality and indeterminacy of being human for all of us. We have drawn on the trajectories of other revolutionary movements that expand what will count as humanity. They involve the desire to be included in the dominant category, the critique (or dissing) of the dominant category along with the celebration of the qualities of those in the

subordinate category. In this paper we have worked through these various revolutionary moves to expand what we understand as human. We have sought to make visible some of the illusions through which the dominant and subordinate categories of abled and disabled are created and maintained. By showing the contingent and illusory practices through which some of us succeed in passing as abled, we have opened a space in which *all* humanity can begin to be understood as intra-active, as emergent, multiple, indeterminate, interdependent and relational—not just relational with other humans but relational within the material, ethical and epistemological world, and its structures and practices.

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