Embodiment as the Third Axis: Disability, Queerness, Privilege, and Oppression

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Recently, I was reflecting on the “Intersecting Axes of Privilege, Domination, and Oppression” reproduced in Kathryn Pauly Morgan’s essay “Describing the Emperor’s New Clothes.” I am cisgender, male, white, of European heritage, highly-educated, and more; I also possess multiple disabilities, and embody a queer sexual orientation. Thus, as a person who fits most of the categories of “privilege” on the graph, and as one who inhabits some of its “oppression/resistance” spokes, I want to critique the logic of the diagram, and to assert that one could redraw it in three dimensions, using embodiment as its multifaceted third axis.

I notice that the diagram is a flat wheel with interconnected lines or spokes. For instance, the line marked “Disablism” runs through the thick barrier of “Domination” from “Nondisabled / Mental good health” towards the oppression and resistance of people with disabilities and mental-health needs. Similarly, the spoke of the “politics of appearance” runs through Domination too, from “Attractive” at the top to “Unattractive” at the bottom; third, the spoke of “Heterosexism” runs through Domination, from “Heterosexual” to “LGBTQ+.”

I find these categories useful only as a starting-point, because these linear, two-dimensional spokes touch each other only at the centre, when—in the world that I live in—they intertwine all the time. I possess spastic cerebral palsy: I bled from my brain when I was born, and so many of the neurons that dwell in my cerebrum, the part of the brain that controls motor function, got scrambled. I also have some related spatial, logical, mathematical, and non-verbal deficits. My muscles are always tense, and all four of my limbs shake at all times.

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Because of these disabilities, I struggle to stand on concrete without having my legs and back hurt, to do math more complex than arithmetic, and to navigate Toronto’s transit-system quickly. I also often occasion stares, and impatient looks and words, as I walk along the street or take the bus. My body functions quite well, all things considered; plus, I possess many other markers of privilege. All that said, my physical and social environment here in Toronto oppresses me to some degree, and no line-graph can completely describe that oppression.

Moreover, my queerness, until recently a well-kept secret even from me, calls out to me in the midst of my physical and social pains. I identify as slightly “heteroflexible.” I’m on the light side of bisexuality, where I mostly prefer women (by a wide margin) as sexual partners, but also sometimes find men attractive. I notice that many people who are queer—some of them people I love!—are kept from marrying their chosen partners and from holding down jobs; some are even hurt or killed because of their God-given expressions of sexuality. I fear that these same things could happen to me. These experiences of oppression are neither simple nor linear.

Because of my essential differences of multifaceted disability and queerness, I claim that there ought to be an axis of depth to Morgan’s diagram. We could title that third dimension “embodiment.” Embodiment blurs the lines of privilege and oppression: for instance, because I can walk, I am not as thoroughly disabled as a person with quadriplegia. Moreover, Jesus, who cut across the lines of diagrams like Morgan’s, loves everybody—rather, every body. Jesus wants every person to love his, her, or their body, and to experience vibrant relationship in a fragile and often-unjust world. Queer people and people with disabilities know that Oppression, Domination, and Privilege are not a linear plane; rather, these social matrices comprise a polyhedral city, where everyone embodies multiple dimensions of advantage and disadvantage.