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To cite this article: Syrus Marcus Ware, Kate Zankowicz & Sarah Sims (2022) The Call for Disability Justice in Museum Education: Re-Framing Accessibility as Anti-Ableism, Journal of Museum Education, 47:2, 130-137, DOI: [10.1080/10598650.2022.2077079](https://doi.org/10.1080/10598650.2022.2077079)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10598650.2022.2077079>



Published online: 24 Jun 2022.



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From the Guest Editors



The Call for Disability Justice in Museum Education: Re-Framing Accessibility as Anti-Ableism

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ARTICLE HISTORY Received 10 May 2022

A photo of a bright blue bench. Hand-lettered text runs across the back and seat. It reads, “This exhibition has asked me to stand for too long. Sit if you agree.”

The above alt text describes the image on the cover of this issue of the *Journal of Museum Education*, “The Call for Disability Justice in Museum Education: Re-Framing Accessibility as Anti-Ableism.” Made by artist Shannon Finnegan, *Do You Want Us Here or Not* is a series of benches and cushions designed for exhibition spaces. This art project arose as a response to the lack of seating in museums and galleries. In Finnegan’s words:

Walking and standing are hard on my body, so I am very attuned to seating options as I move through the world – I’m always looking for spots to stop and rest. I had the idea for this project in 2017 after a particularly painful and tiring museum outing. I was frustrated with the scarcity of seating and realized that making artworks that are also functional benches is one way to get more seating into exhibition spaces.¹

Finnegan’s work is at once playful, subversive, and practical. The bench, as an art piece and as a literal bench, calls out the inaccessibility of museum spaces that deny bodies that are disabled. Finnegan’s artwork functions as a means of disability justice. In this spirit of calling out/in the museums that we work in and visit, we have put together this collection of articles – this call for *disability justice*.

This issue of *The Journal of Museum Education* starts a conversation about how to move beyond accessibility toward anti-ableist museum education, and what such practices could look, sound, or feel like. It documents some of the work being done to establish a path forward for Mad² and disability justice in museums. The articles in this issue document, amplify, and center the practices, voices, and perspectives of Mad and disabled people doing this work, embodying the demand “nothing about us without us.” A majority of our articles are written by or include an author who identifies as disabled.

Disability identities, models, and terms

This issue recognizes and celebrates that disabled identities are vast, varied, and multi-layered, and ultimately exceed those written about here. Therefore, we and the authors have taken a multivocal approach to explore and define disability justice and anti-ableism. We have left it up to the authors to choose the language and terms they feel most comfortable with, and to provide rationales for their word choices when necessary.

The terminology used by disabled and non-disabled people to describe disabilities and disability-related issues has changed significantly over the years. Language is personal,

influenced by individual preferences and other oppressed identities, as well as the model of disability each person is operating from. As Zeibarth and Majewski describe in their article, there was disagreement and even discomfort over the very title of their project. While we do not present a language guide here, we will take space to outline a few of the most common disability models that have influenced terminology and attitudes over the past century.

The *medical model* of disability views disability as a medical problem to be “solved,” requiring the individual to be “cured” or treated. Like the medical model, the *charitable model* makes disability palatable to non-disabled people, typically presenting disabled people as disempowered and deserving of charity. Museum programs that operate on a charity model are often undergirded by ableist concepts, such as the idea that disabled people are helpless, infantile, or generally less fortunate than “abled” people. The charity mode can elicit feelings of relief that the observer is not disabled and is tied to the idea that *if that person can do that, then I can do anything* (often referred to as “inspiration porn”).³

The *social model* asserts that barriers in society are what disable people, rather than a particular disability itself. This theory grew from the disability rights movement that resulted in the passing of Section 504 of the *Rehabilitation Act of 1973* and the *Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990* and fundamentally advocates for accessibility as an equal right. A newer lens for understanding disability is the *identity model*, which asserts that disability is an identity that a person adopts; that is, their disability is not separate from the self but is a core part of how they experience the world. This includes recent shifts in the language some disabled people use to describe themselves – e.g. moving away from person-first language (“person with autism”) in favor of identity-first language (“autistic person”). Adopting disability as an identity is an advocacy tool that disabled people use to advocate for access as a human right, with emphasis on holding society accountable for providing that access. The Identity model views accessibility as disability *justice*, whereas the social model is rooted in disability *rights*.⁴

Looking specifically at cognitive, intellectual, and developmental disabilities, and in line with the social and identity models of disability, the neurodiversity movement asserts these categories of disability as naturally occurring variations in human brains. As early neurodiversity advocate Temple Grandin explained, neurodivergent people are “Different, not less.”⁵ Neurodiversity advocates such as Steve Silberman assert that disabilities like autism are not problems to be solved but rather accommodated for and that neurodivergent people have inherent value and can meaningfully contribute to their communities.⁶

We encourage you to examine museum efforts toward accessibility, anti-ableism, disability inclusion, and disability justice. What model of disability are you operating within? What terminology do you use and why? How do your own identities impact the lens through which you work on these initiatives?

What do we mean by “disability justice”?

While accessibility is a core piece of anti-ableism and disability justice, these terms and ideas are not synonymous. Kletchka and Eisenhauer Richardson remind us that many accessible programs and initiatives (including those often held up as “best practices”)

are embedded within persistent ableist concepts and frameworks. For example, much professional development offered in museums reduces the topic of accessibility to disability etiquette courses with reductive checklists of “dos” and “don’ts,” ultimately positioning disability as a problem to be surmounted and perpetuating marginalization and harm.

As the articles illuminate, operating from an anti-ableist framework means going beyond the idea of “special accommodations” or segregated programming – a common response among museums after the passing of Section 504 and the ADA. It means that museums must develop a culture of collaboration and co-leadership with disability communities and with disabled staff. The articles in this collection explore a range of perspectives from practitioners enacting change on a variety of levels within cultural institutions, from personal pedagogical practice to larger structural changes that are crucial to advancing Mad and disability justice in museums.

Additionally, this collection explores the intersectionality of race, gender, class, and disability in the context of museum education work. In the words of TL Lewis, ableism “undergirds, depends upon and reifies every other oppression.”⁷ Ableism is a tool of white supremacy, and our approaches to dismantling it must be intersectional, as there are no single-issue identities. Patty Berne, co-founder of Sins Invalid, a disability justice-based performance project (www.sinsinvalid.org) asserts that a primary principle of disability justice is the key concept of intersectionality:

Each person has multiple community identifications, and ... each identity can be a site of privilege or oppression. The fulcrums of oppression shift depending upon the characteristics of any given institutional or interpersonal interaction; the very understanding of disability experience being shaped by race, gender, class, gender expression, historical moment, relationship to colonization and more.⁸

It is this centering of multiple identities, and the commitment to understand ableism as connected to heteropatriarchy, white supremacy, colonialism, and capitalism, that makes disability justice distinct from its predecessor, the disability rights movement.

We encourage museum practitioners to examine your efforts to engage disability communities. Do you focus on accessibility and compliance with the ADA? Or do you strive for disability justice? Do your programs consider disability as a single issue, or do they work to understand and incorporate the connections between people’s many identities? If you don’t identify as disabled, how are understandings of disability shaping the work you do in your cultural institution? Many authors in this collection emphasize the necessary work of self-reflection on positionality and identity as an important first step in building anti-ableist museum education practices.

What’s in this issue

The issue begins with a theoretical grounding in critical disability studies and crip theory.⁹ Kletchka and Eisenhauer Richardson start this collection with an article that “urge[s] museum educators who are not disabled to *lean into a space of unknowing* that provokes the kinds of reflective questions that may generate actions in the movement toward critical social justice for their constituents.”

The next two articles, by Eardley et al. and Baldioli et al., demonstrate varied approaches to anti-ableism in reference to blindness and partial blindness. Eardley

et al. apply the lens of disability gain and blindness gain and explore audio description as an act of co-creation. Baldioli et al. approach accessibility for blind visitors by collaborating with users as experts to develop tactile exhibit elements. Together, these articles remind us that disability justice is not a simple checklist of prescribed actions that will “solve” “problems” presented by a predetermined list of disabilities. Rather, it is a process, a conversation, a dance that has multiple paths and multiple conclusions, that not only meets needs and interests in a variety of creative ways, but makes the museum experience more enriching for all audiences.

Ziebarth and Majewski’s article asks how museums can create welcoming, inclusive spaces co-designed with disabled people who have authentic agency in programming, exhibition content and representation. It provides guidance to museum educators for opening up new conversations within their local disability communities to create spaces that foster disability culture and connection. The authors use survey responses to crowdsource data on how various disability community members feel about museums and the changes that they would like to see. Many reported that basic accessibility needs were still not being met in many institutions.

So too, Edelstein’s article offers an informal survey of accessibility programming in museums and finds that few institutions offer the most basic of programs and services. The author also lays bare a bias found in many museums: many of the sensory-friendly experiences he surveys are developed with children in mind. Edelstein offers a candid take on the value of collaboration and consultation as a means of stopping the harm that can occur when disability communities visit museums.

The last three essays are centered on methods and practices of anti-ableist museum education. Kon and Zankowicz offer an anti-ableist self-reflection and facilitation toolkit centered on one sculpture that depicts a physically disabled child. Robledo-Allen Yamamoto and Galuban offer the development of a micro-museum as a model for anti-ableist museum education and conversation-building grounded in personal meaning-making, empathy and friendship. And finally, Theriault and Ljungren’s article is rooted in the concept of museum education as an act of attention and of attentive facilitation. We hope that these articles will generate new approaches in your own practice and serve as useful training resources as together we shape museum education practices that are rooted in disability justice.

Absences

Anti-ableism practices are necessarily dynamic and changing, challenging different manifestations of ableism over time. As a profession, we have learned much since the passing of Section 504 and the ADA in the US. The voices shared here point the way towards realizing our hopes and dreams for the museum education field that are rooted in disability justice. Nevertheless, we recognize that this issue is also full of absences due to barriers and biases that still exist in our field, in publishing, and undoubtedly in our own communication and outreach as guest editors. We want to acknowledge those absences with the hope of inspiring future efforts towards disability justice in museums, and a more equitable documentation of the anti-ableist work we know is out there already.

First, we acknowledge that this issue is US- and UK-centric, but ableism impacts people globally. According to the World Health Organization, an estimated 1 billion people (15% of the world's population) experience some form of disability.¹⁰ In reality, this number is probably much higher. As a category of identity, disability can be fluid. People can identify as disabled throughout their lifetimes, or over a specific period of their lifetime. We hope to see documentation of anti-ableist practices in museums across the world in future issues of the JME.

We also recognize how the format limitations of an academic, peer-reviewed journal may impact the ability of museum educators with varying disabilities to share and document their important work and knowledge. In future issues of the JME, we hope to see expressions and documentations of anti-ableist work that more fully encompasses the diverse ways of knowing and communicating that exist within disability culture and within the world of people with different disabilities.

Finally, with this issue, we had hoped to highlight the important overlap and collaboration between museum educators and other museum practitioners that must exist in order to build anti-ableist museums. While articles touch on disability justice in exhibit design (Baldioli et al.), and training (Therault and Ljungren), we know that the work of museum educators and anti-ableism in museums is deeply impacted by all museum departments. How are museum educators working with curators and conservators to preserve and share the objects and memories of disability communities and histories? How are museum educators collaborating with staff members in development and evaluation to ensure that funding and data collection activities for accessibility initiatives operate from and promote an anti-ableist framework rather than a medical or charitable model of disability? And perhaps most importantly for this journal, how can we address the gatekeeping that exists within the field of museum education itself? How can museum education hiring managers work with HR departments, higher education, and certification programs to reduce ableist barriers to entering the profession? How can practitioners at all levels work with leaders across our field to ensure the ethics, standards, and values that guide our profession on a national and international level are anti-ableist and disability justice-oriented? This means re-writing job descriptions, questioning our biases when it comes to ascertaining who is a "good fit" for a position, and addressing our own prejudices in our pedagogy and community engagement.

A final note about history and the future

This is the first JME issue in 41 years to be centered on disability. The JME published a double issue in 1981, "Focused on the Disabled: The Challenge for Museums: Identifying and Defining the Task" and "Focused on the Disabled Museum Visitor: Solutions Offered, Programs Described and Resources Listed," guest edited by one of our article authors, Jan Majewski.¹¹ We encourage readers to browse that 1981 double issue, and the many other single articles on accessibility published in the JME over its history, to get a sense of past approaches and attitudes towards disability. We sincerely hope it does not take another four decades to produce another issue dedicated to exploring and advancing disability justice in museums. We call on our community of museum educators to carry this work forward with us.

Notes

1. Shannon Finnegan, personal communication with guest editors.
2. The words *Mad* and *Mad Pride* are terms from the mass movement of psychiatric survivors and folks labeled with, or self-identifying with, psychiatric diagnoses, the users of mental health services, former users, and their allies. Mad activists seek to reclaim terms such as 'Mad' and to re-educate the general public on such subjects Mad justice, psychiatric survivorhood, the experiences of those using the mental health system, and systemic saneism. People who identify as Mad may or may not also identify as having a disability.
3. Young, "Inspiration Porn and the Objectification of Disability."
4. Other models have also been proposed; see for example AJ Withers' radical model in *Disability Politics and Theory*.
5. Taken from Grandin's book *Different, Not Less*.
6. Silberman, *Neurotribes: The Legacy of Autism*.
7. Lewis, from Withers et al. "Radical Disability Politics," 187.
8. Berne, "Disability Justice."
9. Crip theory views disability as an identity that should be understood through an intersectional lens with all other identities, especially those that have historically been excluded or oppressed within disability culture itself. See the following source for more on Crip theory: McRuer. *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs*.
10. World Health Organization "Disability and Health."
11. "Focus on the Disabled" and "Focus on the Disabled Museum Visitor."

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Sam Theriault, who helped us formulate the original ideas and questions for this special issue and whose voice is also present in this introduction.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

About the guest editors

Syrus Marcus Ware is a Vanier Scholar, visual artist, activist, curator and educator. He is an assistant professor in the School of the Arts at McMaster University. Syrus uses drawing, installation and performance to explore social justice frameworks and black activist culture. His work has been shown widely, including in a forthcoming solo show at the New Gallery (Calgary, 2021), a solo show at Grunt Gallery, Vancouver (2068:Touch Change) and new work commissioned for the both the 2019 and 2022 Toronto Biennial of Art and the Ryerson Image Centre (Antarctica and Ancestors, Do You Read Us? (Dispatches from the Future)) and in group shows at the Art Gallery of Ontario, the University of Lethbridge Art Gallery, Art Gallery of York University, the Art Gallery of Windsor and as part of the curated content at Nuit Blanche 2017 (The Stolen People; Wont Back Down). His performance works have been part of festivals across Canada, including at Crippling The Stage (Harbourfront Centre, 2016, 2019), Complex Social Change (University of Lethbridge Art Gallery, 2015) and Decolonizing and Decriminalizing Trans Genres (University of Winnipeg, 2015). He is part of the

PDA (Performance Disability Art) Collective and co-programmed Crip Your World: An Intergalactic Queer/POC Sick and Disabled Extravaganza as part of Mayworks 2014. Syrus' recent curatorial projects include *That's So Gay* (Gladstone Hotel, 2016-2019), *Re:Purpose* (Robert McLaughlin Gallery, 2014) and *The Church Street Mural Project* (Church-Wellesley Village, 2013). Syrus is also co-curator of *The Cycle*, a two-year disability arts performance initiative of the National Arts Centre. Syrus is a co-founder of Black Lives Matter- Canada and Wildseed Centre for Art and Activism. He is on the board of the Tegan and Sara Foundation. Syrus is a co-curator of *Blackness Yes!/Blockorama*. Syrus has won several awards, including the TD Diversity Award in 2017. Syrus was voted "Best Queer Activist" by NOW Magazine (2005) and was awarded the Steinert and Ferreiro Award (2012). Syrus holds a PhD from York University in the Faculty of Environmental Studies.

Kate Zankowicz (she/her/hers) is a museum education practitioner who has created community-driven, inclusive programming in museums in Canada and the U.S. for almost twenty years. Her practice has centered around creating collaborative programming with, not for, communities. As a museum educator with a disability, Zankowicz's museum education pedagogy and philosophy are grounded in her lived experience. She has served as an accessibility consultant within various arts organizations, and she has been part of multiple accessibility projects within museums, including creating accessible exhibits and displays, writing verbal description audio tours, and developing multisensory tours. She has also developed and implemented training programs for museum staff about disability, accessibility, and inclusion. Zankowicz holds a PhD in Education from the University of Toronto (OISE). Zankowicz currently serves as the Manager of Youth, Family and Community Engagement at The Huntington Library, Art Museum and Botanical Gardens.

Sarah Sims (she/her/hers) is the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Programs Coordinator for the Botanical Society of America. Her experience spans museum education; classroom teaching; teacher, staff, and volunteer professional development; trauma-informed practices; and diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion programming and training.

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