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THE SEMIOTICS OF ACCESSIBILITY AND THE CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION OF DISABILITY

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"At the heart of semiotics is the realization that the whole of human experience, without exception is an interpretative structure mediated and sustained by signs." Deely, J. (1990) p. 5.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses the semiotics of accessibility drawing primarily from a case study of an African non-immigrant college student with physical disabilities studying in the USA. The chapter explores the cultural construction of physical disability and the semiotics (signs and markers) of accessibility for persons with physical disabilities. From a semiotic perspective, the signs of accessibility operate at three levels — the iconic, indexical, and symbolic. Therefore, the meaning of such signs of accessibility can be constructed at any of the three levels in which they operate. Specifically, this chapter explores the ramp as a sign of structural accessibility for persons with physical disabilities and further problematizes the nature of accessibility the ramp affords persons with physical disabilities. Additionally, this chapter inquires into the cultural construction of physical disability and explores ways in which a person can be "dis-abled" or "enabled" by how a culture constructs disability/ability. (The parenthetical terms are used intentionally — "dis-able" is used to symbolize cultural practices that have the potential to deny or limit a person's ability. On the other hand, "enable" symbolizes cultural practices or cultural elements that empower or enable an individual with physical disabilities by taking the spot-light away from their disabilities).

My attempt at deconstructing the ramp as a sign that marks struc-

tural accessibility for persons with physical disabilities begins with a description of the cultural lens through which I viewed that sign. The description of my personal experiences is undertaken less for merely providing interesting personal anecdotes than to illustrate how my early experiences indeed sculpted the "interpretative structure" (Deely, 1990) from which I developed my understanding of the ramp as a sign. Furthermore, the description clarifies the points of view I assume in my deconstruction of signs of accessibility. Finally, I will provide my own understanding of the role of cultural context in framing the semiotics of accessibility for persons with physical disabilities.

When I began writing this chapter, I was a special education doctoral candidate in a state university in the northeastern part of the United States. Having been born, raised, and educated in Kenya, my background and early experiences critically informed my views and understanding of disability issues. Although I attended two separate large high schools, for my Ordinary Level Certificate of Secondary Education and Advanced Level Certificate, my experience with classmates or schoolmates with disabilities was extremely limited. In the first school I attended, there was only one girl with physical disabilities out of a population of approximately six hundred girls. In my other high school, there was not a single student with any apparent disabilities out of a population of over a thousand students. In both of my high schools, there was a homogeneity among the students on basis of ability and socioeconomic background. The only girl with physical disabilities in my first school happened to be in my class. After our initial shock at her condition, we mainly avoided or ignored her altogether.

Growing up in school, therefore, I had minimal contact with persons with disabilities, save for the occasional trip to a residential school for children who were deaf. This occurred on rare Friday evenings when we went out of the school grounds to perform community service. My friends and I selected the School for the Deaf as our site for community work. However, even then, our contact with the children was minimal as this community service was limited to only an hour. For many of us, the penchant of this particular site lay in the fact that the boys from a nearby boys' school also participated in the activity.

For many non-disabled children living and growing up in Kenya, the opportunities to mix and mingle with persons with disabilities is often quite minimal. Young people growing up have little contact with persons with disabilities, although there is a large population of persons with physical disabilities in Kenya. According to statistics from the World Health Organization (WHO),three quarters of the world's population of persons with disabilities are found in third world countries like my own. An outsider who visits a city like Nairobi is accosted by

numerous people begging on the streets, most of whom are persons with physical disabilities. The invisibility of such a large segment of the Kenyan population comprising persons with disabilities makes for an interesting point of inquiry.

In places like Kenya, therefore, persons with disabilities stand on the fringes of society. There are numerous stereotypes born of ignorance, fear, and cultural beliefs that create locks and barriers that keep many persons with physical disabilities out of most public arenas. Within such a world, many people with physical disabilities exist in a uniquely paradoxical state of being—present, yet completely invisible. The paradox is that many of them live their lives daily in public spaces, such as on the streets, begging, yet they still remain invisible. While growing up, I met many of them on the streets with their hands out-stretched begging, yet, I still did not "see" them. Within my world, people with disabilities were "not seen" and there were very few or no provisions within the public environment to accommodate their needs.

This picture of where my first images of persons with physical disabilities were born forms a rich structure to help in the understanding of my reaction to accessibility for persons of disabilities in the United States of America cornpared to Kenya. Further, it facilitates an understanding of my initial interpretations made during the micro-ethnographic case study that informs this chapter. Having grown up in the context described above, I was in complete awe at how physically and structurally accessible the United States as a country was for persons with physical disabilities. Additionally, I was constantly amazed at how physically and structurally accessible my university campus was. Being a student of special education, I was even more acutely attuned to the issues pertaining to accessibility for persons with disabilities. I had often heard people complain about physical and structural inaccessibility on campus, but when you come from a Third World country like Kenya, the US as a country becomes the model of accessibility.

These lenses through which I viewed accessibility affected the manner in which I framed its meaning and the perspective I took on it during my research project. However, the more enmeshed in the project I became, the more I learned different ways to construct, deconstruct, and frame my understanding of the signs of accessibility that I encountered. As the initial innocence and awe at the physical and structural accessibility of my college campus began to wear off, I learned other ways of interpreting the signs that defined campus accessibility. My gradual loss of innocence is what Potter (1996)describes as the consequence of abandoning initial interpretations of observations, thus undermining of the notion that observation provides an unmediated access to knowledge. This semiotic inquiry supports the idea that the problem of knowledge

of reality is a problem of power, since knowledge and the reality it purports to describe bear marks of its distinctive sociocultural and political history. Understanding is an ever-evolving process through which knowledge of reality is gleaned from multiple perspectives. In this sense, knowledge is both a personal and cultural capital containing unprecedented social and political consequences.

The political feature of the semiotic and social construction of meaning becomes apparent when culture no longer refers to shared meanings that reflect a people's life. Instead, meaning is constructed from cultural practices that refer to the many institutions, classes, and groups that compete in the articulation of the semiotic meaning of things, to the many sites and positions from which signs and meanings are developed, and to the conflicts arising out of the struggle to air perspectives and command audiences.

The contentious feature of cultural practices can be explained by the fact that what is seen, claimed, or spoken is not at any given moment, *ex* officio: some of it is knowledge, other things are facts or opinions, still others are ideologies. The status of these designations is tenuous and, because of that, negotiable. For these reasons and others, a study embedded in cultural practices makes evident the problem of the politics of representation. It raises questions about how particular cultural meanings came to be produced, why, and by whom. It forces upon us the realization that the same cultural ideas, words, and images often mean different things to different groups (see, McDermott and Varenne, 1995). And, furthermore, the meaning of something is continually subject to change both because social objects are multicoded and because there is a multiplicity of languages. Within this viewpoint, our current knowledge of reality is far more tentative, more open-ended, and more contentious.

The Cultural *Construction* of Disability

This inquiry into physical disability is necessarily embedded in the discourse of how the self and the body are constructed. While McCarthy (1996)argues that the self and the body are cultural formations: as cultural objects, subject to extensive and diverse cultural practices, Pierce, cited in Sebeok (1977), asserts that the human being is a text. This means that depending'on the cultural context in which the person is placed, they can be ascribed ability or disability. Or, that their abilities can be "read" differently in different languages or in different cultural contexts. The same body, therefore, placed in a different cultural context could become "enabled" or "dis-abled" based on the social and cultural construction of ability and/or disability within that cultural con-

text. In exploring the relationship between culture and disability, McDermott and Varenne (1995)observe that someone is considered disabled only within those contexts where a certain ability is given consequence. For instance, in the country of the blind, sightedness is viewed as a disabling condition. The implication is that a person with a physical impairment can be debilitated further in contexts where there are fewer accommodations or fewer mediators of access provided.

Although the everyday language of knowledge and understanding are permeated by visual metaphors (Potter, 1996), what is observed is affected by cultural expectations that mediate the categorization of what is seen. Coming to the US, I became very aware and conscious of the proportion of the American population that has disabilities. Although it can be argued that prevalence of physical disabilities is much higher in Kenya than it is in the US, I became more keenly aware of the persons with disabilities in the US than I was in Kenya. In Kenya, these people only existed as nameless shadows that one learned not to see very early on in life, but in the US, people with disabilities exist as acknowledged human beings. Let me explain what I mean by this reference to them as human beings as opposed to shadows.

In the introduction I mentioned that in Kenya there are very few provisions and very little effort is made to assure accessibility for persons with disabilities in public spaces. Due to this lack of accessibility of public space, non-disabled people have fewer chances of mingling with those persons with physical disabilities. As the saying goes, "out of sight, out of mind." In the US, I was constantly reminded of the presence of persons with physical disabilities because public spaces are filled with signs and markers of them. In parking lots, marked spaces are reserved for them; there are ramps and curb-cuts on walkways; some public phones are a little lower; some stalls in public bathrooms are a little wider, . . . the list is endless. These signs and markers of access "mediate and sustain" (Deeley, 1990) our recognition of that portion of the population that has physical disabilities. The signs ensure that population is not forgotten. In the US, the presence of persons with physical disabilities, even in absentia, is mammoth! In the world in which I grew up, their presence was practically nonexistent, even when they were right in your path.

The Signs and Markers of Accessibility

As mentioned earlier, my interest in the interpretation of signs of accessibility begun during the course of a micro-ethnographic case study. The purpose of this micro-ethnographic case study was to examine the cultural construction of disability based on the self-construction of an

African student with physical disabilities who was studying in a university in a northeastern state of the United States of America. The degree of the disabling condition of this particular student necessitated his use of a motorized wheel chair. The participant (whom I will call J) recalled that in his teens, prior to coming to the US, he had to be carried everywhere on his mother's back, as he did not have a wheelchair such as the one he now utilizes.

The major methodology used in the study was participant observation. This means that J and I spent a lot of time together during the study. I accompanied J to many of his classes, the cafeterias, and to innumerable other settings. I recall initially when I started participant observation, it all seemed so routine that I was not quite certain of what I was supposed to be "seeing." Since I staunchly believed that observation offers unmediated access to the world and its features (Glesne and Peshkin, 1992; Potter, 1996), I persisted. Gradually, having spent more time with J, I surely began to "see." Potter (1996) would explain that the trouble I was initially having with "seeing" during the participant observation, has nothing to do with failing to see what was before my eyes, but as failing to see what was before my eyes as a representation of something. Heidegger (1997) refers to this phenomena as ". . . appearance as appearance of something" (p. 25). This "new-and-improved vision" became possible only after I began to embrace a methodological framework that was neither causal nor explanatory but semiotic. Without delving into irrelevant tangents of my newly-improved vision, I would just like to explore the aspects of this newly acquired vision as it relates to accessibility.

In my world as I earlier described, J would have been completely handicapped (dis-abled), as no accommodations or no mediators of access are provided for persons like him. He would have been dependent: relying on people to push him from one place to another, or just confined to a very limited space where he could successfully move around independently. Indeed, according to J's accounts of his teens, he relied on his mother to carry him on her back from place to place. Without his mother acting as his mediator for access, J was otherwise completely immobile. Knowing this, and also being a child of my country, 1 was initially amazed at how many places J and I could go together and how many public spaces we could share. However, as we spent more time together, I began to rethink the meaning of, and to reconstruct, accessibility. As we walked across campus, we were confined to a specific course. The location of ramps dictated where we should cross the street, and once safely across, where we should go on the sidewalks, and exactly where we should cross at the next intersection. The paradox of accessibility became a fascination for me. Accessibility became

extremely irksome, especially when we saw friends across a street or on the other side of the sidewalk, but we could not cross over and speak with them without having to follow the sidewalk to the next ramp. Spontaneity and accessibility often do not mix well. Accessibility as indicated by a ramp or a curb-cut or a lift on a specific bus dictates much of where, when, and how a person like J can do things. Ad hoc decisions about where to go were always tempered by the question of physical or structural accessibility. Even just walking across the street directly opposite entailed having to follow a course prescribed by the position of the ramp or curb-cut.

Semiotics of Accessibility: The Ramp as a Sign. The ramp become an important sign that I was constantly searching for. Even when I was not in J's company, I was aware when the ramp was absent. According to Porter and Bowie (1997) my pre-occupation with the search for the ramp as a symbol of access was an attempt at uncovering and understanding the underlying system that gives signs (e.g., linguistic signs) their full sense. This system is realized through understanding the whole set of possible meanings, never apparent in one utterance or one sign. In this case, the ramp was the signifier and accessibility the signified.

From the time I came back home to Kenya, after many years of absence, I was constantly constructing meaning out of the absence of signs of access for persons with physical disabilities. The absence of the ramp and other signs and markers of access for persons with disabilities in public spaces is representative of their lack of meaningful participation in the public arena. Most buildings in Kenyan cities, including Nairobi, the capital, are completely structurally and physically inaccessible to persons with disabilities, particularly those with physical disabilities.

When the ramp is viewed at the level of thirdness, one begins to ask fundamental questions regarding the rights of persons with disabilities in certain contexts. When there is no structural accommodation to assure access for persons with disabilities into public areas, it becomes an important issue to question the underlying assumptions that are implicit in not providing access for them. Is the underlying assumption that persons with disabilities do not need to enter those places? Or is it that persons with disabilities have people within those buildings who will speak for them and, therefore, they do not need to enter such places themselves?

During my most recent stay in Kenya, I had some business to carry out in a building in Nairobi that houses the Special Education Inspectorate (SPI) division of the Ministry of Education. The SPI offices were located on the sixth floor in a building whose public access is a staircase.

The public elevator located at the front of the building has not worked for many years. On inquiring how persons with physical disabilities get into the building, a building attendant informed me that she had never seen a person with physical disabilities getting into the building! I thought this was very ironic, since the building houses Special Education! This means that the children with accessibility special needs are effectively cut-off from venturing into that building. Another unchallenged assumption is that persons with physical disabilities would not work in that division unless there were special provisions made each time the person was entering or leaving the building. I had rather expected that particular building to be a model of accessibility.

I was really appalled by the inaccessibility of that office and even more so that no-one seemed to see what was so blatantly and ironically obvious to me. After climbing six flights of stairs, I inquired once again about an elevator to that building, at which point I was told of an elevator at the rear of the building that the public could use. There was an elevator alright, but it was inaccessible to a person using a wheelchair. In the first place, it was located at the rear of the building. In order to know about it, one had to ask and building attendants did not tell you unless you asked. There was no sign that let people know immediately about the accessible route. I was walking around the building in circles before I discovered where that rear entrance was. When I found it, I observed that the accessible route was a loose gravel driveway on which cars were parked back to back. This means that one had to weave their way between the cars, sometimes wedging oneself through barely passable spaces. Assuming a wheelchair could successfully get past those cars, once at the door, there was a large door mat. The only type of wheel chair that could get over it would have to be a motorized one or a manual one whose user had immense upper-body strength. If one did get over the door mat, the doorway was far too narrow for a motorized wheelchair. Again, pretending that a wheelchair does make it into the building, there were four steps that led up to the elevator. Once again, let's pretend that a wheelchair does get up those four steps. The elevator was far too small. It was an old fashioned one whose door slides to one side—opening halfway only, and no wheelchair, regardless of size, can turn and fit inside. By Kenyan standards, this building was "accessible"!

Using Pierce's trichotomy of signs, the ramp as a sign of accessibility can be viewed from three levels. At the level of firstness, the ramp is ionic, signifying access or a way in. At the level of secondness, the ramp becomes an indexical marker of a society that is accessible to all its citizens, even those with disabilities, in that, the ramp offers them access to areas that if there was no ramp, they would not be able to get

to without depending on other people to get them there. At this level the ramp becomes an indexical marker of accessibility. At the level of thirdness, the ramp becomes a symbolic representation of the freedom of movement, convenience, and inclusion. It is at this level, that I learned to reinterpret the meaning of the ramp. Here, I began to see the ramp as symbolically representing confinement, inconvenience, restriction of freedom, and a sense of censored access. What I mean is that the position of the ramp predetermines one's route. If one is going a certain direction in a wheelchair, the location of that ramp predetermines where to cross the street, whether or not you are ready; where and when to enter a building; and in some cases, the location of the ramp may even determine the direction you have to go—regardless of the direction you want to go!

To offer an illustration of what I mean by the ramp predetermining what direction you have to go and when you can enter a building, I will use an excerpt from a day with J. On one of my participant observations, I accompanied J as lie went to class. There are two entrances to the building in question. On this particular day, it was snowing and quite chilly. The answer to the question of when we would have liked to be inside the building was, as soon as possible, given the weather conditions. However, given the dictums of accessibility, this was not to be.

Students could be seen ducking into the building through the side entrance. From the direction we were coming, the side entrance would have been the convenient choice. However, that particular entrance was inaccessible and so was the main entrance. There were several steps that one had to climb to get to the main entrance and, consequently, that was out of the question. The ramp was located in the rear of the building. To get there exemplifies what I mean by ramps determining the direction from which you can enter a building. To get into this building, J and I had to go past the entrances I just mentioned, walk around the building to the rear (which incidentally is the exact opposite from the room where he needed to go). To successfully maneuver through this obstacle course, one had to adhere to the prescribed course of the sidewalk that led around and away from the building and then finally to the ramp. The ramp led to a heavy manual metal door that required one to yank it open and as soon as it gave, deftly move the wheelchair to station it in a way to prop it open. Needless to say, since this door is metal, it is susceptible to freezing shut in the winter. Once safely inside, you found yourself in a murky basement amongst huge boilers and plumbing, and an old rickety elevator. The old rickety elevator's push button, like the door handle, was a tad too high for someone in a wheelchair. However, having successfully gained "access" into the building, the old rickety elevator, creaking and groaning, spits you out, allowing you to emerge from

the bowels of the building into the well-lit rooms on the first floor. Phew! . . . You sigh with relief from the exhaustion and uncross your fingers and hope the faithful elevator will be functioning on your way back out and that the outer door has not frozen shut, and if so, you will be fortunate enough to run into a delivery person in the docking area . . . the only other persons that use this "accessible" entrance . . . or that your wheelchair battery is charged enough that you can ram the door open—giving you a running start! Ostensibly, this building is accessible per ADA regulations.

This horrifying experience made me think about the implications of access to building social relationships. Most students meet and establish friendships through the people that they see in class. In J's case, I think the classroom becomes a very important arena for meeting people. However, given the backdrop of what it entails to get around with J, it would really take a patient person to be willing to take the "accessible" route just to chit-chat on the way to class or to go for a cup of coffee after class.

The positioning of ramps was not based on the convenience of the people that need to use them. I dare say the construction and especially their location was not decided upon in consultation with people who use wheelchairs. Ramps seem to be built where it was easiest to build one without incurring too much expense or causing too much inconvenience. I doubt that a person in a wheelchair would have selected the rear of a building, away from all the other entrances, as the place for a ramp. The position of the ramp becomes a disincentive for the development of social companionship.

J and I spent a lot of time in the student center. The student center could be seen as the most access-empowering building. In lieu of a ramp, there are human facilitators of access: people were always entering or exiting the building. In that environment, ramps lost their great significance as the only way to gain access into the building. Access could be facilitated by people. Without calling too much attention to one's inability to open doors, one could rely on social conventions that dictate that if there is someone right behind you, you are expected to hold open the door, whether or not that person has a disability.

Signs of access on the level of thirdness can become symbolic representations of disability. I became struck by the obvious choice made by J for us to use entrances into the student center that did not have the "big PUSH switch" . . . a symbolic marker of disability. J preferred to use the side entrance which was accessible by wheelchair through utilizing human facilitators. This was possible because the social convention I mentioned earlier was in effect.

At this level of thirdness, I began to notice that the ramp and the

"big PUSH switch" had become over-determined signs. Hodge and Kress (1988), criticize Suassure's dogmatic assertion that signs are all and equally arbitrary. Instead of three levels, they offer two levels of understanding signs, opaque or transparent signs. The connection between the transparent sign and the signified is easily seen by the user. People without disabilities generally tended to avoid those entrances that had a ramp or a door with an electronic opening device. It was as though an unwritten law was in effect that stated that those entrances were to be used by persons with disabilities and no one else! People tended to frown when this unwritten code was violated.

At another level, ramps and other markers of access such as the "big PUSH switch" can be seen as indices of degrees of restrictiveness. This allows access to be seen along a continuum, ranging from most to least, and in some cases, total restrictiveness. On another level, one then can ask questions such as: where do we allow people in, and who are those people that we allow in? Here, I also began to view the ramp as symptomatic of control imposed upon people with disabilities by a society that does not fully accept them. Under the guise of providing access, a society can systematically limit or censor access, purposefully determining areas of access and conversely determining areas that would remain inaccessible. For instance, the images I mentioned earlier of the beggar on the street exemplify this limited access. The beggar has access to the street, but he is limited to a very small area of operation: the small place where he is positioned. The only thing he can do from his position is stretch out his hand or speak out, but beyond that, he does not have any more access to that street. Due to his immobility, it is easy for him to become "invisible" to passers by. He becomes so much a part of the street that one does not really notice him.

Role of *Culture in Understanding Accessibility*

This discourse of the semiotics of accessibility is also an inquiry into the Othering of the person with physical disabilities. In many cases, signs and markers of accessibility for persons with physical disabilities are largely determined by able-bodied people. As an able-bodied person who can walk and run and bend and jump over things, it is quite impossible to grasp what really is accessible for an individual who cannot walk and run and bend and jump over things. Whereas in the United States there are published standards in the ADA, 1990, that dictate minimal standards of accessibility, many countries like Kenya do not have such standards. That does not, however, mean that Kenyans with disabilities do not need to get around. What is common across these two cultural contexts is that persons with physical disabilities are "Othered" and are

seldom active participants in decision-making that ultimately affects their lives, granted more so in Kenya than the United States. I would have to believe that if J were a participant in determining the position of a curb-cut to his classroom, he would not have selected the obstacle course that led him into the rear of the building! Nor would the "accessible" elevator to the Special Education Inspectorate division have been at the rear of the building via a loose gravel driveway, with cars parked back to back, a narrow doorway, and four steps up to the "accessible elevator."

Whenever J's electric wheelchair developed a mechanical problem, he resorted to using a manual one. The manual wheelchair was tedious and quite difficult to use. Unlike most other students on campus that used a wheelchair, J had a habit that seemed peculiar to him—not practiced by other students who used a wheelchair. J always carried along a pair of crutches that he often used, particularly when he was sitting down at the table to eat or sitting around socializing with friends. He often got off his wheelchair and transferred using his crutches to a table, a seat, or sometimes, though seemingly laborious and effortful, he would use his crutches particularly at social gatherings. I found this habit of lugging along the crutches even when J was using the cumbersome manual wheelchair very curious. During the course of the micro-ethnographic case study, J told me that he often noticed a marked difference in people's attitude and behavior towards him based on whether he was using a wheelchair or he was on his crutches. J observed that people would often come to him and ask him what he had done to his legs when he used crutches instead of his wheelchair. According to J, people "dis-abled" him much less when he used crutches. In a sense, the crutch as a sign of physical disability carried much less sense of permanence of the disability compared to a wheelchair. It is not unusual to see a person with a sprained ankle or knee using crutches. Hence, people's reaction to J when he was using crutches. The crutch is not always a sign of physical disability within the American culture. That perhaps explains J's preference for the crutches in situations, for instance in social situations, where he did not wish to be further "dis-abled."

Having said that, I hasten to add that my interpretation of the crutch as a sign of physical disability may only be true within the American culture. In Kenya today, I am struck by the number of persons with severe physical disabilities who do not use wheelchairs. Cultural and economic context in this case plays an important role in determining the type of accessibility that can occur within that context and the markers of physical disability in each culture. More people with physical disabilities in Kenya use crutches and wear calipers (braces) on their feet and legs. The extensive use of crutches could be explained in two ways. First,

many of the users may not be able to afford a wheelchair. Second, the state of the roads and the infrastructure may not allow for wheelchair use. Many roads, even in Nairobi, the capital city, have numerous potholes that hinder effective use of a wheelchair. Additionally, there are only very few and poorly maintained ramps, curb-cuts, or elevators for accessibility.

To a great extent, the one who determines/defines accessibility dictates what signs are to be associated with it. For instance, to a person who has the ability to walk, the elevator, regardless of its size or location, is a sufficient sign of accessibility into a storied building. However, to a person with a wheelchair, the size of the elevator, not to mention the location of that elevator relative to a ramp, is crucial for accessibility. Hence signs of accessibility may remain just that: signs, but they have no real meaning if a person using a wheelchair cannot get through those "accessible" places.

This inquiry into signs and markers of accessibility is really an inquiry into how we construct the self and the body. If everybody thought and believed that they were temporarily-able bodied and that everyone's physical ability fades with time, there would be provisions made in the public and even private environments to accommodate everyone regardless of their physical ability or disability or "dis-ability." On my most recent stay in Kenya, I noted with a lot of interest how ill-equipped public places are to accommodate persons with physical disabilities, particularly in offices that serve the public. It was not surprising, therefore, that the largest sole employer of persons with physical disabilities was a non-governmental organization for persons with physical disabilities. What was even more ironic was that the job most of them were employed to do was to make special shoes and wheelchairs for sale to other people with physical disabilities. The irony is that special shoes and wheelchairs enable persons with physical disabilities independent mobility within the non-disabled world. However, prevailing cultural practices about disabilities in Kenya and the knowledge that sustains those cultural practices place little value on Kenyans with disabilities.

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