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The annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association in Seattle, WA, 9–13 November 2022

An unsettling report.

Abstract in English

This is a conference report that presents ethnographic field notes on the experiences of roaming the hosting city of the 2022 annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association. Seattle has one of the largest unhoused populations in the United States and presents a case study in an “unsettling landscape” – the overarching conference theme. Everyday moments of struggle and kindness among people on the bus and in the cityscape, raise questions as to when and whom is granted “disability expertise” (Hartblay, 2020), humanizing some folks and criminalizing or erasing others. The text focuses on the intersection of homelessness and disability and wonders about the relationship between “hostile architecture” (de Fine Licht, 2017) and accessibility measures (Chellew, 2020).

Keywords: disability, defensive/hostile architecture, homelessness, ethnography, accessibility

Die Jahrestagung der American Anthropological Association in Seattle, WA, 9.–13. November 2022

Ein beunruhigender Bericht

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Konferenzbericht basiert auf ethnografischen Feldnotizen, die während Erkundungen der Gastgeberstadt der diesjährigen American Anthropological Association entstanden sind. Seattle hat die dritthöchste Wohnungslosenpopulation der Vereinigten Staaten und stellt eine Fallstudie in „unsettling landscapes“ (beunruhigenden Landschaften) dar – dem übergreifenden Konferenzthema. Alltägliche Momente des Überlebenskampfes und der zwischenmenschlichen Wärme im Bus und im Stadtbild werfen die Frage auf, wann und wem „disability expertise“ (Behinderungsexpertise) (Hartblay, 2020) zugestanden wird, wodurch manche Menschen humanisiert und andere kriminalisiert oder unsichtbar werden. Der Text konzentriert sich auf die Intersektion von Obdachlosigkeit und Behinderung und fragt nach dem potenziellen Konkurrenzverhältnis zwischen „hostile architecture“ (feindlicher Architektur) (de Fine Licht, 2017) und Maßnahmen zur Barrierefreiheit (Chellew, 2020).

Schlüsselwörter: Behinderung, defensive/feindliche Architektur, Obdachlosigkeit, Ethnographie, Barrierefreiheit

1. Nomads of the Concrete and Conference Dwellers

First held in 1902, the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association – or the “triple A” as it is called by conference-goers – now brings together more than 3,000 activists, academics, and educators from North America and across the globe. In this conference report on the 2022 meeting in Seattle, I could have written about the inspiring work of the scholars that I had the privilege to listen to. I could have written about how the theme of “Unsettling Landscapes” informed contributions from across so many different sub-disciplines, from cultural, educational, medical, climate, surveillance and public policy anthropology to archaeology and linguistics. Instead, however, I offer here a space of reflection on matters of disability, responding to the landscape within which the conference was held – the city of Seattle – and to the people who frequent the neighbourhood around Pike Street and 3rd Avenue.

The “Emerald City” takes its name from the greenery surrounding it. Nonetheless, this port city is an important economic hub in the U.S., to which people gravitate in search not only of jobs (Amazon is a significant presence) but of leisure: hiking trails and seafood. Standing on the waterfront by the pier and facing out to sea offers an impressive vista: the ocean opens up straight ahead, snow-covered mountains appear in the distance to the right, islands sit across the bay, and on the left looms a big, illuminated Ferris wheel. Turning around to face the city, steep streets lead up into the heart of the maze that is downtown. Knowing Seattle to be one of the nation’s capitals of unhoused people¹ (Babayan et al., 2021; Batko et al., 2020), I braced myself to ignore the sometimes shocking sights that I had encountered on certain streets or in train stations of European metropolises like Berlin, Warsaw, or Manchester. Gradually, though, I found that I could not ignore the faces and voices that pushed through the background noise of the conference bustle and emerged into the front of the picture.

Along the streets leading right up to the majestic Seattle Convention Center (SCC), people hunch over to scratch food from in-between the pavement tiles, pick up cigarette butts or search through the trash piles and garbage cans. Couples and small groups huddle together amid the cold concrete surroundings to share a smoke and some warmth. There are half-naked people in sleeping bags, open wounds on faces, people limping in shoes that don’t match. One guy wears a hammer hanging from his belt. Sprinkled in-between are the conference-dwellers with their identifying red ribbons bearing the conference logo, the person’s name, and their institutional affiliation. We rush up the street only to be stopped by red traffic lights, then hurry right on and escape behind large glass doors. Speaking with Nell Koneczny, the former Accessibility and Meetings of Coordinator for AAA, I learn about the term “hostile architecture”² and the ways that cities create impossible conditions for unhoused people to set up camp (de Fine Licht, 2017, 2020). Indeed, there are no benches at the bus stops: nothing to lean against or hide underneath. These efforts to deter people from staying still anywhere downtown mean that homeless people are forced to be constantly on the move: urban nomads wandering in plain sight among the concrete. This is – quite literally – a sharp-edged city, teaching me lessons on the intersection of homelessness and disability.

2. Fieldnotes from the Bus

Every morning and every evening, my conference commute consists of a one-hour bus journey to and from a Seattle suburb. “We don’t really do buses in America,” one fellow conference-dweller says to me. Funny, I think to myself, the bus is always on time, the drivers are warm in their “good mornings” and the passengers polite in their “thank yous”. On weekdays, many commuters are people of colour: I watch a Latina nurse in her hospital scrubs talking in Spanish on a video call with an older woman, maybe her mom. Two elderly Black men discuss politics and sports, sharing an “I love you” as one of the gentlemen gets off, answered by “I love you, too, man”. Twice, people get on who use a walking device or trolley loaded with bags and blankets. The driver lets down the ramp and one man pushes his belongings with great effort and small steps into the heated bus; exhausted, he sits down on the first chair, getting off again two stops later and pushing the walker into the darkness. Although the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) has mandated access

to “public accommodation, transportation, and other important areas of American life,” shelters for people who experience homelessness do not always have to be accessible (ADA, Title III Regulations; <https://seattlecrisis.org/shelters.html>). Outside of the bus, it is freezing at night. We have long left behind the glittering lights of the skyline and the bus has snaked its way into the smaller neighbourhoods: broken windowpanes here, a little Vietnamese Pho place there.

On Saturday, the bus seems to be more populated by white folks: typically, families wearing matching jerseys in support of their local football team. Two tender moments: a woman gently rests her head on her partner’s shoulder; another woman leans her head against the chest of a big dog that she has invited to jump up on the seat next to hers. She wears only a thin sweater, and her spine is bent; twisting her head to the side, she looks up from time to time. Her dog is her support and warmth and a shield from the looks of the other passengers. Indistinctly, she murmurs and swears. For a few short minutes, the bus takes the massive highway that crosses the port area, linking downtown with the southern suburbs. At the first stop, the woman and her dog move towards the exit and slowly climb out of the bus. They disappear into the concrete jungle, the dog leading the way, sniffing left and right and making eye-contact with the passers-by.

3. Unsettling Urban Landscapes through the Lens of Disability

Stepping once more into this downtown space, amid global coffee chains and luxury boutiques, my eyes fall on those who don’t leave, whose place is in these streets – for now – scrubby hair, skinny and pale. I notice that each person is holding a slice of pizza and spot a man with several cardboard boxes whose contents he hands out to the people who shuffle towards him, pulling grey blankets closer around their bodies. We talk. His name is Kevin, he owns a printing store and comes out every day to hand out pizza slices³. “Never assume,” he says, “we don’t know their stories.” Sometimes they tell him they love him, sometimes they chase him down the street, he says with a smile. He has broken up fights by offering folks some pizza: hot and hefty in calories.

It was a sunny week in Seattle, no rain despite the proximity to the sea. Instead, some streets were flooded by tin foil, lighters, spoons, detergent, plastic bottles – any paraphernalia that could serve. There were crutches, wheelchairs, dogs, shouts to invisible others, open sores and septic wounds. One person’s support is another person’s offense and the city knows how to turn elements of hostile architecture into accessibility measures (Chellew, 2020). While bumps on the pavement may help visually impaired folks to navigate the pedestrian area, for others these mean one less opportunity to find a place to sleep. When is a dog a service animal? When is addiction considered a disease? Who gets to claim an intellectual disability and whose wounds are worthy of treatment? Homelessness draws an interesting line between those who are granted disability expertise (Hartblay, 2020) and can mobilize the corresponding accessibility infrastructure and those who cannot. The AAA conference happened amid this landscape, but what has it produced to help understand it better, or to ameliorate the dire living conditions of so many of its inhabitants? At what point do we become part of the “hostile architecture” that excludes so many of those who dwell among the concrete city? In Seattle, there was a great deal to learn about the nature of unsettling landscapes, designed to separate and produce a disconnect between anonymous nomads and temporal dwellers.

While Laura Heath-Stout’s lecture, titled *Nothing About Us Without Us: Disabled Anthropologists, Disability Studies, and Building a More Strongly Objective Anthropology* or panels, such as *Transforming Anthropological Landscapes through Disability Anthropology*, or *Cityscapes of Precarity: Navigating Vulnerability and Possibility in Urban Life* provided thought-provoking engagement with the issues that I raise in this text, this report turns from lecture halls to “portraying the sights and sounds of urban life” (Hannerz, 1969/2004, 16). This way, the embodied experiences of Seattle’s unhoused population offer an immediate confrontation with the disabling culture of an unsettling cityscape and the impact that the absence of basic services has on people’s bodies and minds.

Notes

¹ According to several sources, Seattle has the third highest population of unhoused people (11,199) in the U.S. after New York City (78,604) and Los Angeles (56,257), see: <http://www.citymayors.com/society/usa-cities-homelessness.html>; <https://ofhsoupkitchen.org/cities-with-highest-homeless-population>.

² I thank Nell Koneczny for introducing me to this term and sharing her wisdom with me.

³ Kevin is a generous individual who gracefully distributes food. There are also local, non-profit organizations that are working hard to help and support folks in difficult situations. For more information, see: Maia Szalavitz (Aug. 24, 2022): Something better than a tent for the homeless. New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/24/opinion/seattle-homeless-solutions.html>

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