

What bodies are capable of support?: investigating crip and service animal futures *with Olivia Dreisinger & Amanda Harvey*

Olivia's voice comes through clear and bright, reaching me from the other side of the country. We touch base on how our individual days have progressed, and quickly discover a mutual hot yoga appreciation. She tells me she practiced earlier. I'm jealous, having been cooped indoors for most of the afternoon. She remarks "I feel so calm afterwards [...]" You do the same thing every time so my body knows what to expect, which is helpful."

Olivia's work centers on the body, and our phone call allows me to gain further insight into a question she's been asking: "what bodies are capable of support?" Our conversation is concentrated around her recent film, titled *Handler is crazy*, which looks at the relationship between service animals and their handlers. It focuses its attention on one specific handler, Koyote Moone and her medical and psychiatric service dog Banner, and explores issues surrounding non-visible disabilities and discrimination against service dog teams.

AMANDA HARVEY: How did Handler is crazy come to be?

OLIVIA DREISINGER: Making this documentary was really unexpected for me. My friend had sent me Banner's Instagram page which, back then, mostly featured Banner cosplaying characters from different tv and movie fandoms paired with captions about different disability related things, "like this character has PTSD or this character has anxiety." Banner had around 20K followers on Instagram, which is pretty substantial for a service dog page. Now it's at 30K so it's doing pretty well. Around that time, I had been researching the intersections of furry fandom, neurodiversity, and disability. The furry fandom is a community of people who enjoy drawing, dressing up, or writing about animal characters who have human-like traits. Scrolling through her Instagram with a cosplaying dog talking about disability rights, I thought, yes, this person must be a disabled furry! So at that point, I decided to reach out to Koyote and ask her, I think my message was, "Are you a furry?" There was no other context. She said no. After that, I started looking more closely at Banner as a service dog and became really interested in how cosplay was an atypical labour that her service dog performed for her as well as an atypical form of medical equipment decoration. Then, more

broadly, I became interested in the experience of service dog teams and whatever disabilities came with that were fine by me. But that initial point of contact eventually led me to establishing a relationship with Koyote and later led me to apply for funding to make a documentary about her life with Banner.

Could you discuss the issues around disability, support, and service dogs? What does it mean for a body to depend on an additional source of care and further, what does it mean to ask an animal for this kind of support?

How do we ask animals to support us? Do animals understand disability? What do we ask of them when we ask them for support? What risks are involved? These are all questions I have been thinking about in the aftermath of my documentary.

I think it might be helpful to bring up and attempt to define tasks that service animals can perform and to separate emotional support animals from service animals. An emotional support animal's (ESA) main role is to provide comfort, care, and companionship. Emotional support, by ADA standards, is not a legitimate task. By that I mean, asking animals to care for us is not a testable or trainable task, it's "automatic" or a natural response from the

animal, unlike asking an animal to perform blood pressure alerts or retrieve items or remind us to take our medication. Service animals have more rights than ESAs because they are specifically trained to perform tasks that fit their handler's needs. There then becomes different levels of legitimacy that reflect the type of support people require, comfort and companionship being less legitimate.

I also want to think about what support service animals require from us, in order to work for us. During any stage in their service, both during the training and working stages, there are risks for the animal. For instance, service animals are at risk of washing out, meaning the dog is taken out of or is not suitable for service work. This can happen for a variety of reasons. The dog might not want to work, it might be afraid of working in certain spaces, or it might burn out, or get sick, or be placed under too much stress. Koyote's service dog in training Smeagol, we see her only at the start of the documentary, washed out after getting attacked by a dog while doing public access training in a store. Koyote had to retire and rehome her, since the attack left Smeagol traumatized and scared of other animals. Banner has also been attacked multiple times by other dogs, attacks that have put Koyote's own

body on the line in order to protect Banner. So my last question to think about is, what do we ask of animals when there is risk in what they do for us? What is our responsibility to that risk?

I think because of the short filming time of the documentary, I wasn't able to address any of these things and I had to redirect a lot of the things that I wanted to explore into making a documentary that was accessible to nondisabled people or non-service dog users to watch.

Could you talk about the links between disability and certification? Do service dogs allow for liberation from patriarchal & systemic control (i.e. how the body is governed in post-capitalist society)?

People want to define a pet from something that can provide more testable, certifiable assistance to disabled people otherwise I feel like they're just worried that chaos will ensue, pets are everywhere, which is probably true. Especially if they're not good with other dogs, or not socialized properly, or afraid in all these different spaces that they're not confident to be in.

Service dogs are governed under certain legal systems. Since they are still dogs, they do fall under systemic control and there are respective

certification laws. You need to get your service dog spayed or neutered, you need a medical letter prescribing you the dog, and in Canada, or at least where I live in BC, service dogs need to pass a certified public access test and be officially registered with the province. Medical letters also control who gets to be disabled (how disabled do you need to be in order to qualify for a service animal, for instance?) and the public access test presents additional financial and ability barriers for handlers to navigate. In the service dog community, you'll also come across many fraud websites that will send you fake documents, medical letters, and vests to certify your animal. These fake registries allow owners to bypass certain barriers, but it also creates a lot of issues and risks for certified teams. Owners who use these sites may bypass vital training and relationship building stages with their animal, for instance, resulting in stressed or aggressive animals in public settings and situations they really shouldn't be in.

There are a lot of weird certification systems going on and you as a disabled person are thrown in trying to understand what's legal, what's not legal, what your rights are and then how do you even get a dog, what breed is best for your needs, how do you train it, what tasks constitute a service dog versus an emotional



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support animal, and so on.

Disability scholar Margaret Price pushes back against this impulse to control and standardize bodies, what she refers to as the “biocertification process,” to challenge the boundaries between what is a service dog and who is disabled. Price herself is a service dog user. She’s a handler to a small dog, of unknown breed, who is partially blind, slow, and old. Price asks an important question, “Can a disabled animal do service or support work?” While a service dog can be any size or any breed and can become a service animal at any age, the fitness or hyper-ability of the

animal is not usually up for debate. I think this further controls and limits the idea of what bodies are capable of support, both human and nonhuman alike, and what support looks like.

I had read the description of your documentary and was like okay, y’know, and then I started to watch it and think about my relationship with Dimsum my dog, I realized that she was there for support and I guess I hadn’t really thought about that before. She was adopted in a time of need and as I had mentioned to you, I guess I felt selfish watching the film knowing that I had actually

How do we measure the stress of animals?

relied on her so much when maybe my needs aren't as pressing.

That's harmful in any disability circle, I think, to have this competitiveness in terms of who needs this more? I don't think it should work like that. I think that does happen because resources for disabled people are scarce. There's so few resources for us. There becomes this built in hostility to other people who we don't think are deserving of accessing those resources or services when we can't get them which is very harmful for everyone involved. I don't think people should be policed or gatekept on that sort of thing. I

think emotional support animals and the benefits of animal companionship are very legitimate. I wish that, with ESAs in particular, that people could go to organizations more freely to get public access training so that they could bring their ESAs into more spaces without other service teams being harmed, or the dog being harmed, or the dog harming other dogs or people for instance.

*What bodies are capable of support?
That's such an interesting question.*

I have a lot of questions, but not answers right now.

Ya, and that's totally fair, I mean, you're working through all of this.

In Canada, I think people are confused about what's legally allowed with service dogs, and there are different policies federally and provincially. Generally, I think, people think "service dog" and they think "guide dog" for blind people and they don't really know about what other kinds of disabilities service animals can help with.

Before going over to meet Koyote, I was looking into fraud websites and other service dog advocacy pages. I also found a lot of small businesses run by disabled people who made custom service dog vests, harnesses, and patches. I wish there had been more time to showcase that in the documentary because Koyote has some great patches like "caution: handler bites." One of her friends at the convention had epilepsy specific patches. Custom patches and vests becomes a really interesting way of educating people around you about what that service dog is specifically for and helps to gain visibility around that. You're used to seeing a guide dog harness or you see the guide dogs being trained in public by different organizations, but you don't really see that for any other service animal.

As Koyote discusses, using Banner

as a service dog is an alternative option to medication. Could you discuss this: do you see potential for resistance where human and animal meet? How does this relate to / oppose popular ideas of (inter)dependency and care?

Being disabled can be very isolating and working with a dog, I feel, allows for meaningful connections. You can't necessarily feel connected through medication. Certain medications just isolate you further (not that I'm anti-medication). Service animals are framed as medical equipment, but they're not machines. They're emotional, social, and physical beings and our relationship to them is complex and interdependent and should also be full of care for them. You need to provide them with good living and working conditions and let them retire at a good age or take care of them when they get sick. The care has to go both ways. The welfare of the team, not just the handler, has to be considered. Disability justice and animal justice are equally valuable (and connected) and I think we all need to reflect critically and thoughtfully about that.

I'd like to talk about the conversation between Koyote and the school principal near the end of your documentary. During their heated exchange, Koyote states "I know my

rights as a disabled person” while being told that her knowledge is incorrect and being offered in return deliberate/ignorant misinformation. Could you discuss this exchange and the links between discrimination and disability and how this relates to private / public realms?

This was a really important moment in our filming process and completely accidental. We had put a mic on Koyote beforehand and our sound guy, Raph, decided to remotely record her going into the kids’ school with Banner since we weren’t granted filming access inside. Once inside and alone, away from the crew, Koyote was free game for discrimination. Unfortunately, this is a common experience for service dog users when they leave their house and go out into public.

I think also, besides the fact that the principal has a history of discriminating against Koyote, the problem was that Banner was not visibly marked as a service dog while entering the school (the ADA does not require service animals to be marked). Service dog vests can visually cue the public that yes, okay, this is a service dog and not a pet, but it also marks the handler as disabled. Not everyone wants to be made visible that way because there is always risk in that visibility. If the only obvious visual marker that

you’re disabled is a service dog, then this invites further discrimination or even harassment into whether or not you’re legitimately disabled. I know that Koyote frequently posts on Banner’s page about the horrors of going to Walmart and how much longer it takes her to do her shopping there because people want to ask her about her medical issues, or what Banner is for, and really personal things that you don’t want to tell everyone and you don’t want that to be the first point of connection with people either. I don’t think the people who are asking her are generally interested in making a good connection with Koyote, they’re just being nosy.

I’m not sure what to do with this issue of visibility here, but I think it comes down to problems in policy and public understanding. Service dogs teams disrupt expectations, expectations of what an animal is or what disability looks like. Banner has new patches on her service harness now that say “fuck off,” so maybe that’s one solution. Service dog patches are actually a really interesting way of pushing back against ableist encounters in public. I think Koyote has other standard patches like “please don’t pet me I’m working” to more defiant patches like “caution: handler bites” or the ultra-defiant “fuck off” patch that I just mentioned. Then people still



react and are like, “Oh my god, that dog has a patch that says *fuck off* on it, that’s so offensive” or “that’s so rude.” No, you just don’t get it.

How can we create alternative modes of understanding to include disability narratives into our everyday lives?

I think, because I’ve been in a very particular place with my own health, that my way of thinking about disability has really changed. I feel like it’s hard to include disability unless you experience it, or someone you’re close to experiences it, otherwise it’s very easy to forget. May-

be that’s not a great answer, but it’s the only one I have to offer at the moment. Just include us, have us in your communities, listen to us. We also don’t want to be educating everyone all the time. That’s why I wanted to make the documentary. If someone wants to know more about service dogs, I can send them this documentary and they can learn a little bit more. It can be sent out there and I can help people learn about this very specific person and what they need.

--Olivia’s film *Handler is crazy* is on YouTube.