

Research Articles and Essays

**Divesting from the “Fake Service Dog” Narrative in Service
of a Future that Centers Care**

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Author Note

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Abstract

Service dog handlers face negative public judgments due to misconceptions about "fake" service dogs. This autoethnographic reflection explores how discourses about "fake service dogs" reinforce ableism, capitalism, and exclusion. It argues for shifting from policing and idealized expectations of service dogs toward a future centering care, mutual responsibility, and inclusivity for service animals and their handlers in shared public spaces.

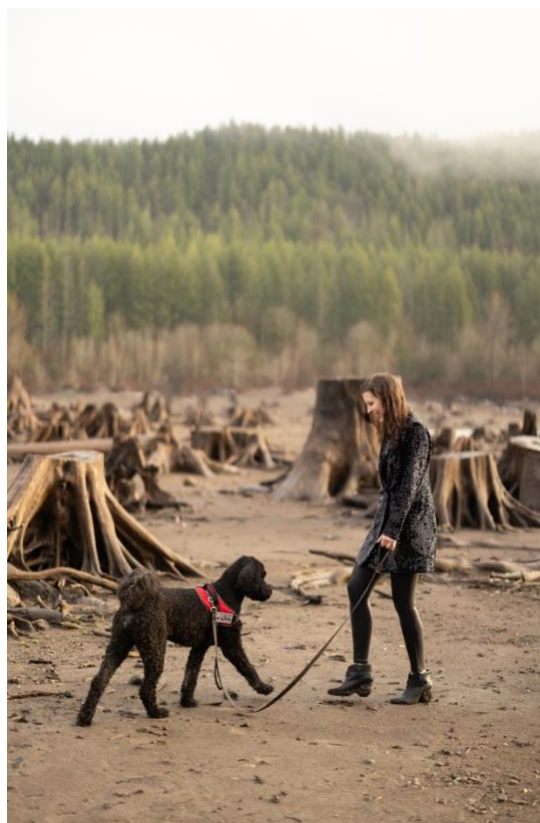
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Divesting from the “Fake Service Dog” Narrative in Service of a Future that Centers Care

Four years ago, I met the light of my life: a mostly black bundle of fur with a teddy bear face that we named Eilish. Though we didn’t originally plan for Eilish to be my service dog, when the puppy trainer we were working with—who knew my disability status—suggested that Eilish might enjoy service work, we decided to try it and see what happened. I had no idea how much Eilish—both as a pet and as a team member—would change my life. She is spunky and opinionated and eager to work; she is clever and kind and bossy as all get out. The depth of relationship that she has brought into my world has healed me in ways I couldn’t have dreamed before her.

Figure 1

Amy (author, service dog handler) and Eilish (service dog)



Note. Amy, a white woman with brown hair and wearing a sparkly black blazer, faces Eilish, her black Bernedoodle service dog wearing a red service harness. The two are walking toward one another in an outdoor setting with scattered tree stumps and an evergreen tree background. Photo by Claire Meyer Photography.

While Eilish's partnership has transformed my experience of public spaces, we have also become subject to ableist discourses about "fake service dogs," by the very nature of our being a service dog/handler team out in the world. "Fake spotting" (Mills, 2023), as some call it, is the policing of service dog teams by the public. Though not the focus of this piece, "fake spotting" also includes policing disabled folks' access to a variety of accommodations—for example, questioning whether someone is "disabled enough" to "deserve" a particular accommodation (Mills, 2017; Wendell, 2001).¹ "Spotting fake service dogs" takes the form of accusations ("that's not a real service dog"); declarations of disgust ("you know how I hate, I detest fake service dogs" (Cabral, 2022)); insider questions or statements ("but *we* know..."); or "simple" observations ("I saw...").

Fake spotting can be overt or implied. For example, in a recent interview on *The Bitey End of the Dog* podcast, the host, Michael Shikashio (Shikashio, 2024), interviewed Veronica Sanchez, founder of Cooperative Paws Service Dog Coach, a certificate program for professional trainers in service dog training. Sanchez began the interview defining service dogs in a way consistent with the Americans with Disabilities Act (U.S. Department of Justice, 2020), which says that a service animal is a "dog that is individually trained to do work or perform tasks for a person with a disability." Sanchez went on to distinguish service animals from emotional support animals, whose presence provides comfort to their handler (but who are not trained to perform tasks related to their handler's disability).² Shikashio followed with:

Alright, so as you were talking there, you were mentioning, and it was going through

my mind as well, actually, you know, the gray area there between an emotional support animal and a true service dog, and you had mentioned the task. So I'll just throw a theoretical out there for you. What if somebody's like, 'Yeah, I've got, I've got, this, my dog is a service dog.' You know, 'I have a mental condition,' or something, they say something that they have, they're not specific. 'And my dog does a chin rest on my knee when I'm having this issue.' Would that qualify as a task? Is that somebody then can say, 'Oh, this dog is a service dog,' just because it does, you know, a very baseline behavior like chin rest on my knee when I'm, uh, experiencing this.

When I heard this, my heart sunk. This quote reifies "fake service dog" narratives in a number of ways: Shikashio says that the distinction between emotional support animals and *true* service dogs "was going through his mind as well," unprompted by Sanchez; he points out that the hypothetical service dog handler's disability is underspecified; and he asks whether a "very baseline behavior" like a chin rest "would qualify as a task." The immediate marshaling of these questions and concerns speaks to the potency of the "fake service dog" narrative.³

Service dogs have been called "fake" for behaviors ranging from lunging or biting in public access spaces, to panting on a plane⁴, to being given a chicken nugget by their handler at McDonald's (Mills, 2023), to wagging their tail at the presence of another person (Cabral, 2022). Eilish and I have been "tsk"-ed at in national parks for being on a trail together. I have been asked if Eilish is "still in training" because she was shifting around while settled during a conference, when a fly was landing on her back repeatedly. And I have received comments about giving her a treat, as though she should not "need" that to work. Mills (2017) reports

that of the 482 service dog handlers in their sample, 77.4% have had their legitimacy as a team questioned. Undoubtedly, because of the ways in which ableism intersects with and relies on white supremacy, cisheterosexism, fatphobia, ageism, classism, and every other system of oppression (Connor et al., 2016; Schalk, 2018), Black and Brown, trans, queer, fat, young, and poor folks will be more frequent and/or more forceful targets of fake-spotting, including calling service dogs fake because of the race, gender, size, age, perceived wealth, etc., of their handlers.

Mainstream public discourse about “fake” service dogs has created an environment in which I am hypervigilant and frequently downplay Eilish’s and my success as a team. I feel anxious every time Eilish steps an *inch* out of not just public access standards but also the *expectations* that people have of service dogs. I am hyperaware of the language I use when talking about what Eilish does for me, making sure that I use words like “task” and “trained” rather than language that suggests that Eilish’s presence brings me comfort (which it does), so as to distinguish her from an emotional support animal (Price, 2017). I internally minimize the compliments we receive from members of the public, and focus instead on the questioning looks, because that feels safer to me. I *need* Eilish to be able to be in the world with me, and the world has told me that to have her with me is to conform to a particular image.

As someone who uses critical frameworks in her educational research day job (but who is not formally trained in disability studies), I am interested in what fuels “fake service dog” discourse(s). I am less interested in answers like “fake service dogs fuel fake service dog discourses” and more interested in answers that speak to the profound impact that ableism—and intersecting forms of oppression—have on the way we think, act, and feel. I approach this question as an autistic person who is drawn to complexity; as a chronically ill

and disabled person invested in collective, intersectional liberation (Lakshmi Piepznar-Samarasinha, 2018); as an aspiring trainer who cares deeply about the welfare of dogs; as someone who is a member of a service dog/handler team that has been subject to these discourses; and as someone who believes that “identifying the workings of governmentality through texts ... is a means to intervene in such practices to effect social change” (Price, 2011, p. 29). What follows is an autoethnographic reflection (Ellis et al., 2011) that highlights some of the resonances I’ve felt between “fake service dog” discourse(s) and critical frameworks that I apply to the study of science education. Here I apply these frameworks without expecting absolute theoretical coherence of myself (as if that were a thing), and without asking myself to be comprehensive in my treatment. This is meant to be a reflection on my experience, with the support of critical frameworks.

Service Dogs as “Ideal Workers”

One of my claims is that underlying our discourse about “real” (and “fake”) service dogs is the image of an ideal worker—that is, an image of a worker that ultimately serves to keep capitalism afloat, and therefore an image that is deeply ableist, white supremacist, and patriarchal.

Service dogs that “meet standards” are described as “bomb proof” (Mitchell, 2024), able to stay focused and calm in every circumstance. Veronica Sanchez (referred to above and founder of Cooperative Paws Service Dog Coach), in a podcast interview with Michael Shikashio (Shikashio, 2024), says that service dogs “are dogs that are exceptionally tolerant. These are *not* typical dogs.” Likewise, in an interview with Robert Cabral (Cabral, 2022), Kristi Smith, a service dog trainer, said that service dogs should have “no reaction, no response” to another dog’s presence. When asked by Cabral how important it is that a service dog has *zero* reaction to (“not even see”) another dog snapping at it, or play-bowing toward

it, Michele Khol, another service dog trainer and podcast guest, responded, “It’s extremely important.”

In many cases, service dogs are expected to pass extensive health checks and to be of “substantial size and strength,” traits that are narrated as necessary for the dogs to be able “to provide effective and long-term assistance” (Parenti et al., 2015, p. 72). Dogs’ capacity for service work is thought to be determined—in part or in whole, depending on whom you ask—by their biology, by their breed, and/or by their temperament. For example, Assistance Dogs International, an organization that credentials organizations for service dog training, recently “expanded a successful breeding cooperative” whose goal is to “improv[e] the quality of all Assistance Dogs,” providing more “access to a reliable and relevant puppy supply” (Assistance Dogs International, n.d.). When asked how much the “fitness” of dogs for service work is nature versus nurture in her interview with Robert Cabral, Kristi Smith responded, “I think it’s about an 80/20 split, quite frankly.” Service dogs are distinguished from other support animals like therapy dogs and emotional support animals by their *specialization*; they are dogs who perform specific, trained tasks for people with disabilities, not dogs whose presence simply brings comfort.⁵

An image of a dog that is able to be productive under any circumstance and in any context, a dog who is healthy, who is biologically determined as “fit” for the job, and whose work is specialized, is the image of an ideal worker.⁶ This is a worker who is *ceaseless*, whose commitment to their job supersedes any other motivation. This kind of commitment is posed as necessary for the job itself, even as this imagery extends (in my view and that of others; Mills, 2023) beyond the requirements in the Americans with Disabilities Act (U.S. Department of Justice, 2020).⁷

This is the same image that has harmed disabled people, whose lives are constructed

as *less valuable* under capitalism (Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018; McRuer, 2006; Taussig, 2020). Our bodies do not “behave” in the ways that capitalism insists that workers’ bodies should—that is, we (disabled people) obviously *have* and *are* bodies, indeed, bodies that disrupt the machinery of capitalism by calling for rest and care. In fact, Davis (2014) points out that many of us disabled folks are considered to have lives “not worth living” (p. 4), because we are thought to be outside the reach of what capitalism can make “healthy” and “beautiful.”

The image of the ideal worker rarely reflects the lives and realities of disabled people, many of whom do work, would work if accommodations were made or care were offered, and/or contribute to speculative futures that disentangle us from ableism (Kafer, 2013; Schalk, 2018; Wendell, 1996). What I argue here is that the service-dog-as-ideal-worker image likewise rarely reflects the lives and realities of service dogs, service dog/handler teams, and/or the transformative possibilities of partnering with service animals. However, this image does serve to reify and reinstate the nondisabled bodymind’s⁸ *right to exclude*—ableism as spatiality—which I turn to next.

Ableism as Spatiality

In this section, I will draw from literature on *spatiality*—including the ways in which oppressive ideologies are spatially mediated—to unpack the role that “fake service dog” discourses, fueled by capitalist imagery of the ideal worker, play in reinstating ableism as a *right to space*.

In seminal work in whiteness studies, Ahmed (2007) describes whiteness as an *orientation*—the “here” from which the world unfolds—which shapes what is in and out of reach for particular (racialized) bodies. She argues that places and bodies are historically situated, such that our bodies inherit “the reachability of some objects” (p. 154)—that is, the

extent to which things are in (or out of) our reach. We thus inherit, in our bodies and their relationship to place, a sense of how and if we can extend ourselves into space. Whiteness, Ahmed says, functions “as a form of public comfort *by allowing bodies to extend into spaces that have already taken their shape*” (p. 158), allowing such bodies to “fit in” with ease. Likewise, whiteness produces a state of dis-ease in nonwhite bodies, applying pressure when such bodies seek to extend into (white) space, and in some cases policing or punishing that (attempted) extension into space. *Spatiality*, in this view, is a “pre-existing relation to place that guides [actors’] extension into social space based on their prior experiences in place” and their perceptions of “the normative behavioral expectations of said place” (Seawright, 2018, p.13). Price (2017), applying the lens of spatiality to disability studies, cites a “public anxiety about *bodies out of place*” (p. 4)—e.g., “bodies that don’t look the way they are supposed to, function according to standards of ‘excellence,’ excrete in ways considered ‘dirty’ rather than properly contained” (p. 4)—as a reflection of how ableism is mediated by space.

This sense that *whiteness* has a spatial dimension is also reflected in Harris’ seminal work (1993) on whiteness as property. Harris argues that in the United States, whiteness is property, where property is conceptualized as a *right to space*. Whiteness then manifests as settled expectations of ease, access, and (by extension) the right to exclude, which are all codified in and enforced by law. Indeed, Harris argues that the *law protects whiteness*, in the same way that the law protects property rights, as reflected in a variety of Supreme Court cases throughout U.S. history. In one such case, *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*, the defendant (Bakke), a white male, claimed that he “had been the victim of ‘reverse discrimination’” (p. 1769) when he was not accepted into medical school. Evidence of discrimination, Bakke said, included that his grades and standardized test scores were higher than those of the students of color “admitted through a special admissions program” (p.

1769). The court ruled in Bakke's favor, "extending legal protection" to Bakke's expectations "of continued white privilege" (p. 1770). In her analysis, Harris points out that the admissions program "violates equal protection standards only if whites as a group can claim a vested and continuing right to compete for *one hundred percent* of the seats at the medical school, notwithstanding their undue advantage over minority candidates" (p. 1772, emphasis mine), an advantage that was secured by "illegal oppression and segregation" (p. 1772-1773).

What I claim here is that ableism is likewise spatially mediated—that ableism is an orientation to space that extends ease and comfort to those who can approximate the image of the ideal bodymind (and *discomfort* and *out-of-placeness* to disabled folks), and that the image of the "ideal bodymind" is a form of property that is wielded by the nondisabled bodymind (or the bodymind that can approximate such) to assert their right to space. Indeed, under ableism-as-spatially-mediated, the nondisabled bodymind can assert its right to *one hundred percent* of the space, as Harris notes in the case of whiteness.

The deployment of the service-dog-as-ideal-worker via "fake service dog" discourses reflect settled expectations of the right to exclude and the right to feel at ease. When someone implies that Eilish may not belong because she is distracting them by shifting her position to remove a fly from her body, this reflects to me an expectation that the nondisabled bodymind should be free to extend itself with ease into *one hundred percent of the space*. Indeed, Mills (2023) points out that "many of the community-constructed (but not legal) requirements for Service Dog teams" rely on the "ableist belie[f] that [disabled people's] use of assistive technology and in turn, [their] disability, should remain as hidden as possible" (p. 13).

These discourses become even more alarming when we consider the ways in which affect is entangled with power. Ahmed (2014) argues that the *feeling* of uncomfortability (or fear) often becomes the *evidence* of danger, or of not-belonging-here. Building from

Ahmed's work, Leonardo and Zembylas (2013) offer the example of what happens in the white body when a Black man is walking toward us on a poorly lit street at night. (I use "us" in the previous sentence to indicate my position as a white woman complicit in white supremacy.) Our (white) bodies have been conditioned to feel fear in response to the presence of the Black body, and we then take that fear as *evidence* that the Black body is dangerous, *regardless of their behavior*.

We know that the presence of people who are marked as disabled often produces a state of dis-ease in the nondisabled bodymind. We (disabled people) "are constant reminders of ... the inability of science and medicine to protect everyone from illness, disability, and death" (Wendell, 1996, p. 63). When my presence—or the presence of Eilish—is felt as discomfort, this discomfort can then serve as proof for our not-belonging-there. Particularly relevant to my case here are moments when the nondisabled bodymind feels itself to be in a state of dis-ease in our presence, and then funnels that dis-ease through the narrative of the "fake service dog" to justify our exclusion, on the basis of behavior that is absolutely typical in a dynamic relationship between a human and a dog, such as trying to get a fly off your back (I know I sound like a broken record, but really, this incident made an impression), or stress-panting in a new environment, or receiving treats to indicate that good work is happening.

Some final thoughts

Above I have argued that "fake service dog" discourses serve to uphold capitalism and ableism (and thus all interlocking forms of oppression), systems I would like to see challenged, in service of building something more liberatory. But if I suggest loosening the "grip" that these narratives hold, someone is inevitably going to ask me what I would propose instead, and someone else is going to ask but what about dogs-in-service-vests who bite. Here are some preliminary thoughts.

I don't like "fake service dog" discourses for all the reasons I just said: at their core, I see them as reifying capitalist imagery and ableist space-claiming. I also don't like the word "fake" for all the harm it has done to people seeking support in the form of subsidies, accommodations, and care—all originally meant to *remediate* the impacts of white supremacy, ableism, patriarchy, and other forms of interlocking oppression. But I also recognize that service dogs are an *accommodation*, and accommodations are fundamentally about giving more access to ableist space; they are incremental changes that we can make while we also try to change the system.

What, then, would changing the system entail, in my view? One early step would be to shift the discourse from "fake-spotting" and "compliance" toward *welfare*, *interdependence*, and *collective care*, all values of the disability movements I have come to love (Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018). In a world where these are primary lenses—where we understand our primary responsibility as taking care of one another—we would all have to acknowledge that public space is *shared space*. That would mean responsibility for me, as a service dog handler, to care about the safety and well-being of the people and dogs that Eilish and I are sharing space with. I do my best to work with Eilish so that people who are afraid of dogs can feel secure that she will not approach them without permission; that Eilish is not a bite risk to unsuspecting passersby; and that people with noise sensitivities can rely on us to manage how loud we are. Taking care of one another also gives me responsibility (with gratitude) for Eilish's well-being, scaffolding public access in a way that minimizes stress for her and cultivating conditions where she feels connected to me in our teamwork.

But a model of public access that centers care also makes the people that we share space with responsible for *caring about the safety and well-being of Eilish and me*, in a way

that acknowledges the reality that ableism is spatially mediated. This care is partially reflected in adhering to often-cited guidelines about what to do when you see a service dog in public, which is to ignore them as much as possible, and taking some responsibility for what unfolds interactionally when you don't. But it is also reflected in divesting from fake service dog discourses and adjusting our collective expectation that every service dog look and act like the "ideal worker" image that has been popularized. It does not make sense to me why, if it is appropriate for the service dog/handler team and their work together, a service dog should not be able to be carried, should not sniff the air as people pass, should not be able to sit rather than settle or stand rather than sit, should not be given permission to say hi to a person they know. I want service dog/handler teams to be free to be learners, to be able to make "mistakes," and to continue developing as a team over time, without fear of exclusion or punishment. I want service dogs' welfare to be a top priority; I want them to *enjoy* their work, for that work to center their agency as much as possible, for work to feel consistently rewarding for them—for them to be *dogs*, in a particular kind of partnership with humans.

There is much more to say about making this vision pragmatic, including how we hold predatory organizations accountable, how we collectively give trainers the freedom to dream possible futures that center care in their work with their clients without threatening their capacity to continue working, and how we open up space so that partnering with a service dog becomes accessible beyond those who are wealthy or can wait years for an organization to match them. But first we must agree that a different future is desirable, and to open up the space to dream about what that could be. I am eager to be in conversation about this.

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Footnotes

¹ For example, Mills (2023) reports that in a series of interviews with service dog handlers concerned about the pervasiveness of “fake” service dogs, “assessing whether a stranger’s dog in public is a ‘fake’ Service Dog or not appears to be largely based on 1.) *whether the person ‘appears’ disabled or not* and 2.) the dog’s behavior at one moment in time” (p. 9, emphasis mine). The policing of whether a person is “disabled enough” to “deserve” an accommodation is not my focus here, even if it is an important way in which ableism shapes disabled peoples’ access to and experience of public spaces.

² To be clear, I find the distinction between service dogs and emotional support animals somewhat nonsensical. For example, Eilish is a PTSD service dog; she supports me through panic attacks via trained tasks that mimic deep pressure therapy. But Eilish’s presence itself also mitigates the symptoms of PTSD for me. She offers a non-judgmental presence in spaces that I experience significant judgment; knowing she is there to support me has significantly decreased the frequency of panic attacks; and I dissociate less frequently when I have her to focus on in addition to the environment. This experience resonates with findings from studies that document the experiences of service dog handlers, who, for example, report that “untrained behaviors” (Rodriguez et al., 2020, p. 6), such as providing a calming presence, were more important than trained tasks for mitigating symptoms of PTSD.

³ Thanks to Michael Shikashio (in a private communication) for feedback on this paragraph and for offering his support of this work.

⁴ This video appears to have been removed from YouTube, where I originally saw it. In the video, a service dog handler positioned their camera to record a dog in a service vest who was sitting at their handler’s feet, panting. The person recording the video interpreted the dog’s panting to indicate stress (whereas I could have interpreted the dog as hot) and suggested that a real service dog would not be stressed on a plane. They panned the video down to their service dog, who was relaxing at their feet.

⁵ Price (2017) offers a “careful rethinking” of this definition of a service dog through the lens of *crip spacetime*, posing questions that blur boundaries and situate the handler/service dog relationship in an ethic of care.

⁶ To be clear, my point is not to debate whether ethology or evolutionary biology matter in a species whose genetic pool has been substantially manipulated through selective breeding. My point is to highlight that this way of talking about service dogs reifies imagery of an ideal worker.

⁷ The ADA defines a service animal as a dog of any breed or size that is “trained to perform a task directly related to a person’s disability.” Under the ADA, dogs are allowed in public access spaces unless their presence “fundamentally alters the nature of the goods, services, programs, or activities provided to the public” in that space. The ADA is careful to elaborate that this is rare and gives the example of a zoo, where there may be animals that are the natural prey or predator of a dog and the dog’s presence may evoke aggressive behaviors from those animals. Serving food in an establishment, for example, does not permit that place to exclude service dogs. Likewise, service dogs can be asked to leave if they are not housebroken or are not under the control of the handler—e.g., the dog is barking excessively.

Nowhere does the ADA say that service dogs should “not see” other dogs, or that they need to pass particular health checks. The popular image of a service dog as “bomb proof” feels to me like a reinterpretation of the law, as is often the case when laws are implemented in a white supremacist, ableist society.

⁸ I use the term “bodymind” as a challenge to a Cartesian dualistic view of the mind and body as separate entities and as a marker that ableism (and disability) spans the full bodymind space, consistent with the work of Price (2015).



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