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A Counter-Narrative: The World According to the White Cane

RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

Visual impairment often becomes noticeable to others through the visibility of a white cane. This public sign of blindness is an imperative signal that people understand, interpret and act in accordance with; however, the white cane is more than an external iconic aid. This study describes, explains and reflects on movement, assemblages, relationality, companionship, interconnectedness and learning opportunities that resonated across multiple white cane users' experiences. Biographical pieces of two visually impaired people and their close networks, literature based on authors' lived experiences and testimonies of the first author who is also visually impaired are brought together into a coherent narrative, where the white cane is the protagonist. This narrative deconstructs the omnipresent metanarrative 'all blind people always use a white cane' into a complete evocation that acknowledges the complexity of daily living that materiality and blindness entail. We use the white cane to rethink blindness and open a multisensory and multidimensional understanding.

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INTRODUCTION

This study explores the meanings of a white cane, following Michalko's (1998) description that 'blindness is noticeable insofar as white canes and dog guides are' (138). There is a direct association between experiencing visual impairment and 'public signs of blindness' (Michalko 1998) that makes the disability visible (Bulk et al. 2020; Crossland 2024; Omansky 2006). The collective and cultural representations of blindness all entail iconic aids such as the white cane, guide dogs and dark glasses. Those public signs of blindness (re)produce 'metanarratives of blindness' (Bolt 2014)—typical and vivid reductionist images or depictions of the disability that assign stereotypes, construct attitudes and regulate discursive practices. Everyone and everything are written into the story of a well-sighted, ableist world; whereby the blind person is always accompanied by a white cane. For instance, sighted people picture an old image of 'the blind man (less often woman or child) traveling town streets and country roads with a staff [or] stick' (Godin 2021, 145). 'Like a lot of blind people who carry canes and employ guide dogs, public signs of blindness are not always understood, and the word still needs to be spoken' (Kleege 1999, 39). There is more to the story than this stock character.

The word 'blind' means something different to nearly everyone (Crossland 2024; Michalko and Goodley 2023). Modern ways of discussing blindness are connected to sight, defining blindness as the absence of sight. This conceptualization of blindness confirms, maintains and prescribes that the world is sighted; it leaves few choices for blind people other than trying to 'pass' or fit in (Michalko 1998). However, blindness can be represented in different, experiential and affirmative ways (Godin 2021; Kleege 2018; Kudlick 2009; Michalko and Titchkosky 2020; Omansky 2006) that encompass numerous behavior strategies to deal with 'seeing'. We support the perspective of Kleege (1999), who states: 'I announce my blindness without apology, because, I hope, that others will revise their image of blindness when they see me' (227–228). We would like to bring into focus issues around blindness by '"viewing" the world through blindness, "seeing" its creativity, learning from its "observations", and trusting its perceptions' (Healey 2022, 123). We assume that multiple forms of blindness influence how those with a disability participate in life (Healey 2022; Whitburn and Riffo-Salgado 2024).

In this study, we invited two visually impaired people and their close networks to share what it means to experience blindness in daily life. The assemblage, of their accounts, combined with literature by authors with lived experiences of blindness and the testimonies of the first author of this publication produces a counter-narrative. The assemblage sheds light on the functionalities, relationalities and ways of becoming in the world with and without a white cane. An assemblage is a multiplicity that acts on semiotic, material and social flows (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). Assemblages form collectives made up of human and nonhuman beings, animate and inanimate 'things' and demonstrate how an agent always acts in collaboration (Bennett 2010; in Davies 2021). Therefore, assemblages are always in the process of becoming through multiple encounters and become defined 'not by what they are but by what they can do or become' (Bansel and Davies 2014, 41).

The assemblage in this study unravels the materiality of the white cane and the multiple strategies for being with a white cane in the world. We specifically deconstruct the metanarrative that 'all blind people always use a white cane' by showing the complex interplays of various intentions, perceptions and relationalities and by de-centering the human being who is blind. We insert experiential knowledge about blindness into cultural discourse, to move, displace, 'disturb or disrupt' (Michalko and Goodley 2023) stereotyped ideas about the lived, embodied and social experiences of blindness. We give blindness as a lived reality a more obvious place in cultural spaces and want to expand public knowledge about blindness and its 'appearances' (Michalko and Titchkosky 2020). We intend to take seriously the ethical imperative to challenge the stability of knowable categories, such as blindness and iconic aids, as they usually emerge within metanarratives (Bolt 2014; Whitburn and Riffo-Salgado 2024). In doing so, we become aware that the white cane itself, known as a functional aid, must be involved as a main character in our search for an affirmative view on visual impairment.

THEORETICAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE WHITE CANE

Giving a basic description, the white cane is a tall, thin, white stick that sometimes folds up. On the one side, it has a golf club-like handle and on the other, a (round) tip that glides or taps the ground (Thompson n.d.). The white cane and the technique of sweeping the cane back and forth was first introduced as a 'blind stick' for the many disabled people during and after the World Wars (Backman 2024). Nowadays, the identification or mobility cane is a physical object; the shorter one is a symbolic cane and the longer one is a medical tool. As a rehabilitative non-optical aid, it is widely acknowledged for its assistance in enhancing mobility and promoting independence. The white cane has reached naturalized and iconic status as a simple and straightforward tool that enables practical functionalities for those who cannot completely rely on their sight (Bulk et al. 2020; Crossland 2024; Godin 2021; Thompson n.d.). It is considered a substitute for the person's blind eyes—a set of non-human guiding eyes, leading the way forward, detecting hazards ahead and sensing the texture of the surface. It actively communicates useful sensory impressions to its practiced user, allowing them to feel the nature of the ground and gain an understanding of their surroundings. As Kleege (2018) explains: 'Speaking from my experience, the cane is more of an obstacle detector than a tool to map the environment. The cane's tip proceeds me as I move through space alerting me to objects I need to step over or around. It merely announces the presence of an obstacle, without distinguishing between a rock or a tree root'. (16) This highlights how the cane enhances safe navigation by alerting the user to immediate obstacles, even though it may not provide detailed information about the environment.

The appearance of the white cane is also informative and functional for bystanders or other people occupying the space. The white cane is an obvious label of visual impairment (Backman 2024; Bulk et al. 2020; Crossland 2024; Healey 2021; Hoogsteyns and van der Horst 2016; Michalko 1998; Omansky 2006). The peculiarity of the white cane is a way of dressing up blindness by silently telling the world that the person is identifiable as blind. Being equipped with a white cane, and being preceded by tapping sounds, the user usually cannot move in a particularly discrete manner. They are pointed out as having difficulties as being different. The white cane increases the visibility of the disability and prevents the individual from establishing themselves as a fully sighted person. The cane also prevents anonymity and the possibility the holder could be perceived as 'anyone else'. Thus, the white cane itself is actively interacting with the surrounding world and has the ability to affect people, places, discursive practices and its user's identity. The cane can be regarded as an independent social and cultural actor that powerfully impacts and transforms reality. Although using a visible marker of blindness may enable opportunities, this sometimes comes at a high cost. It reduces the risk of confrontation by making it obvious when someone might collide with the cane user; however, it also attracts unwanted attention. For example, Allan (1999) states it was for a young woman more comfortable to act drunk to disguise disability rather than revealing blindness when she wanted to impress a partner at a party. A rather one-dimensional figure of the blind person has evoked: the white cane represents blindness and reduces the person to their deficit, blindness, which is 'a problem in need of a solution' (Mitchell and Snyder 2000 in Titchkosky et al. 2022, xxv). It relocates others' attention to the vulnerability of the user's movements. The cane motivates people to show extra consideration. For instance, in crowded environments, it is helpful that the cane alerts bystanders and activates them to offer support to the blind person (who will presumably need help). People see the cane and step aside—often without saying anything. At the same time, the cane may also provoke users to receive unkind and disqualifying comments, leaving users feeling vulnerable (or less in control).

Consequently, the white cane is—or can be—incredibly stigmatic (Backman 2024; Bulk et al. 2020; Godin 2021; Hoogsteyns and van der Horst 2016; Omansky 2006). The white cane becomes an extension of the lack that it compensates for, it becomes the visible proof of a person's 'failure'. It quickly becomes a powerful symbol of helplessness in the eyes of many sighted people and it is perceived as a way to 'cure', remediate or repair the fact that somebody cannot use their eyes in an ableist way. This stigmatizing gaze may carry shame. Backman (2024) refers to the 'negative visibility of the cane' that degrades the user to another societal status. The white cane functions to signify the user as a non-able-bodied or disabled person. Thereby, the recommended aid, paradoxically, contributes to the establishment of power orders (Davies 2021) and the reproduction of ableism, exclusion and inclusion. For many people who live with visual impairments, it is far from a comfortably integrated extension of their body; avoidance or resistance to its use is consequently reasonable. Considering such effects of the white cane, it is no wonder that this material object, more often than the absence of vision, makes the user stand out. Some cane users' reluctant attitude toward the white cane must be understood in connection with the tool's association with widespread norms of able-bodiedness.

The simple action of taking up the white cane entails more variations, nuances and layers than the initial understanding of the white cane as a straightforward external material object. In a coordinated pair, the material object and human being are in temporary coexistence (Backman 2024; Healey 2021; Hoogsteyns and van der Horst 2016): the white cane and its user become interdependent, reliant on each other. The person-with-the-object affects how we could interpret co-presentations of the person and its companion species as an inevitable part of the body. In such assemblage thinking, the person and the white cane are united like a machine for successful movement. Both are constantly connected and interact with each other. The white cane becomes an extension of the person's body, hands, touch and contact with the world, affecting the users' muscles, sensitivity and ability to discern and interpret. The body becomes an extension of the white cane, influencing its direction and movement and regulating pressure to create tapping sounds. The person, the body, the white cane, the tapping sound, the blindness, the movement and the surface become intimately entangled in an assemblage that enables movement through, participation in and becoming in the world. It is this assemblage that defines the multiplicity of disability experiences. The experiential world of blindness entangles a blind person, allies, materialities, norms, etc. whereby 'components in the assemblage affect each other in complex, multidirectional, and unexpected ways' (Looman 2024, 28). In this article, we take a creative leap of faith to provide a fresh take on the white cane and blindness.

METHODOLOGY

We are engaging in narrative inquiry. Narrative inquiries (Clandinin 2006; Raymond et al. 2022; Rodríguez-Dorans and Jacobs 2020) apply relational research methodologies to study people's experiences, stories, relationalities and life. Using this method, the unique unfolding of a lived life in its particularity is highlighted. By assuming that social, cultural and historical contextualization is inherent to all knowledge, such narrative inquiries ethically attempt to entail negotiation, respect, mutuality and openness to multiple voices. We describe, reflect, interpret, explain and communicate narrated experiences to operationalize the complexity we would like to illustrate.

Related to the omnipresent metanarratives of blindness and the white cane, we compose a counter-narrative of the white cane. Metanarratives are narratives that are so widely known they are considered natural. They function to make the world comprehensive, manageable and reasonable (Lindemann 2017; Lindemann 2020; Tarrant 2022). Metanarratives are connected to emerging normative expectations of behavior, roles and relationships. Consequently, they become mutually reinforcing, justifying discourses on exclusion or ableism; they are seldom perceived as right or neutral. Counter-narratives intend to disturb the oppressiveness of metanarratives and replace them with accurate ones (Lindemann 2020). Counter-narratives explore lived experiences to challenge dominant explanations and expected social behavior associated with stereotypical profiles (Tarrant 2022). Counter-narratives demonstrate many possible ways of being.

We interact with multiple perspectives that resonated throughout multiple participants' experiences in a Western context. The experiences of two participants (Lucie and Alice), of many of their network figures (partner, mother, colleague and friend), and of authors of international literature as well as podcast makers (Bulk, Godin, Healey, Kleege, Kudlick, Meesters, Michalko, Omansky and Thompson) are included. We acknowledge that the first author of this publication is a vital presence in the story. She is blind; her expertise is informed by the literature, scholarship and lived experiences (Rodríguez-Dorans and Jacobs 2020). She has woven depth and breadth of the existing literature and her own personal connection to the data of Lucie and Alice into the production of a counter-narrative. In the omnipresence of vivid metanarratives, this counter-narrative presents a more complete evocation that acknowledges and manages the complexity of the object–body–environment assemblage under investigation.

Therefore, we take the white cane as the protagonist of the counter-narrative, believing the cane is an integral part of the assemblage of blindness. This involved a process of thinking, learning and experimentation to re-conceptualize our understanding (Whitburn and Riffo-Salgado 2024) from within the skin of the material object (Kennedy 2006; Rodríguez-Dorans and Jacobs 2020). We become involved in knowledge construction and become witnesses to the existence of people—and objects—whose lives are largely hidden from regular society. We want to address other, more affirmative ways of thinking about blindness.

As such, we recognize the white cane as an active actant that embodies 'thing-power'. Bennett (2010; in Davies 2021) defines thing-power as 'the curious ability of [apparently] inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle' (6). Thing-power invites us to think about where our bodies, intentions and actions begin and end (Davies 2021). It makes visible how all of us are continuously shifting in indeterminate relations and emergent assemblages wherein things are ontologically and epistemologically present. We consist in relation to and with things and that is how meaning is created (Davies 2021). Embodying the thing-power of the white cane, we intend to make visible how patterns of blindness emerge, diffract and co-exist.

The white cane, as the protagonist with thing-power, brings stories of blindness as an assemblage. It brings nuance and complexity to its own existence and the lived experiences of blindness. The white cane refers to itself with 'I', or 'we' when it is about the togetherness with its user ('she'). This approach of weaving academic and creative writing together invites us to imagine different ways of moving through the world, different ways of using a white cane and different ways of understanding blindness (Titchkosky et al. 2022).

THE WHITE CANE' COUNTER-NARRATIVE: 'WE HAVE A COMPLICATED RELATIONSHIP'

Initially, she denied that her vision could not be corrected with glasses or contact lenses. Although having trouble seeing things, she still has a little bit of sight. No one sees what she sees, no one knows how hard she is working to see. And no simulation spectacles cannot let others experience what her vision is like; these spectacles would boil her entire lived experience down to things that do not work properly. She emphasizes what she can see, rather than what she cannot. She often sees well enough to witness passers-by staring at her when she is on the move. Even her partner would say she is not blind, but the light is blinding her. He would often say that bright contrasting lights annoy her and make moving without a cane, guide dog or human help impossible. The technical definition for her (absence of) sight, determined according to her inability to perform visual activities, is 'legally blind with some usable sight'. She is located on the spectrum between perfect sight and total darkness and, consequently, has a complicated relationship with blindness. She struggles with her place as someone in between.

Seeing in an instantaneous and absolute way, as a whole, at a glance, demands a lot of time and concentration. She makes this effort silently and alone, as a private and intimate act. When a person would describe to her aloud what they see, it would be, essentially, a theatrical performance, almost always a shared experience whereby that person is a mediator. Her personal sight can be artistically described as 'photorealistic painting' rather than high-definition photographic imaging. What she sees is a product of her brain using imagination beyond visual limitations. She learned to see by relying on sight and by negotiating internally when and when not to use her sight. Even though she can see something, touching always makes things more real. It is a matter of re-seeing or re-vision, a matter of hand-eye coordination and negotiation with the brain, where imagination, intellect and memory collaborate. Her brain connects what her eyes (do not) see with what her hands feel and, through me, with what I touch and sense. Through touch, I am involved in this eye-brain dialog that she navigates in an unaccustomed, unnatural way.

She does not like to talk about her visual impairment to avoid drawing attention away from her actions. So, she blocked the conversation when they—some of her friends with whom she had drinks—asked her when she was going to start using me. Oh, I did not introduce myself, I am the white cane. Their suggestion was difficult for her, it brought the vulnerability of making her disability appear. She experienced an element of choice in being explicitly blind or to 'pass' as sighted. She did not want to be known as 'the blind', she felt 'not blind enough' to need

Orientation and Mobility training. She struggled to take me into her hands as she had spent her whole life afraid of blind people. They told her that she does not have to act fully sighted for life to be valuable. This comment was going against her longstanding shame about and resistance to using me. She carries me, as a nonverbal sign that she does not see as much as she seems to, although she sees more than the word 'blind' is generally assumed to designate.

Her partially sighted friend provokes her by saying that she must use me proudly and put herself out there. When she wants to do something, she must do it with the grace of an elegant diva. It is her choice to use me or sit at home and wait for some well-meaning sighted person to rescue her. Damn, he had a good point and she agreed that she cannot stay home; she intends to go to the office, the pharmacy and the bakery, even when there are roadworks at the moment. You know, embodying me in an assertive and trustful way can keep a blind traveler out of danger. Her colleagues and her father believe that I am useful and necessary in public spaces. They are tempted to come and get her or take her somewhere when they 'see' how busy, dangerous and chaotic the road is. They cannot ignore incorrectly parked cars, potholes in the road, rubbish bins and bicycles on the sidewalk and omnipresent steps. They worry about her movements and believe her survival depends on me. Their idea is that my existence ensures her independence, confidence, assertiveness and social belonging. Indeed, I try to be her bodyguard, a radar for puddles, waste or dog poo she would like to avoid, but to be honest, I might need further innovative tricks to make our appearance graceful.

Her colleague found it better for her to use me, sometimes thinking that I am more reliable than a guide dog or the support she can offer. She experienced that her guide dog or another person does not always take every aspect of her visual impairment into account. For example, the dog runs under overhanging branches of trees she gets in her face and her colleague does not notice when she painfully turned her foot. Her colleague felt guilty because she could have seen it but she was looking ahead, not at the ground. I have a functional competence, to detect obstacles; but this does not mean that I am the only way to gain orientation and mobility. I also would not notice things in the air and companionship with me compared to with humans will differ.

Her mother frequently advises her to carry her cane and hold me closely because when others notice, they can help her; they cannot help if she does not reveal her needs (read: problem). Her mother makes her aware that I symbolize blindness, blindness as needing help and, consequently, I actively affect others' responsibility to act. Bystanders would like to care and give support when the visual impairment is prominent. Traditionally, the ultimate idea is powerlessness and the public response is well-intended paternalism. People are indeed interacting when they see me or a guide dog and ask our user if she needs help and knows where she is. Others would like to compensate for her blindness (and the related idea of helplessness); however, she chooses not to make use of this on every occasion. She gets frustrated when others take over, taking away the opportunity to be independent and learn. She feels patronized when people intrude their help rather than offering it: she will make it work; she is not as pathetic as they think; she can do more than they think. She believes that they do not have a realistic image of how people with visual impairments live. Moreover, she recalls her colleague holding back when she saw her with a white cane. Her colleague had never known someone blind and was anxious. Her colleague decided not to intervene. So yes, sometimes I invite people to help but no, it is not always the case. I think of my appearance as a relational act. She must know that I can enable interactions and that she can take it as an opportunity. She can carry me strategically in favor of what conversations and encounters she might fancy.

Her mother also explains that presenting me is educational, it tells the world—in case they do not know—that not all people see in the same way so people must pay attention when she is out there. To be sure, I can indeed be of help by enabling her to walk with more confidence in unfamiliar or dark environments. When I am presented, a crowd of people can be 'parted like Moses parting the Red Sea', as Crossland (2024) explained. I alert drivers and other pedestrians of the presence of blindness. This means that the person who sees me must—again—do something (i.e., go away, take a wider berth). Additionally, my owner can educate others in dealing with visually impaired people by speaking about it, explaining what she sees and what she does not see, or what is (not) possible for her; she can guide other people. She also wants to prove that she belongs and can do things. For example, she wants to prove that she, as a partially sighted person, can be a good professional. Her goals and desires in life are much more central than the lack of not seeing as a master lens through which to look at her and her life.

I know I am tiring. Finding her way with me takes a lot of time, energy and concentration. She cannot see the traffic lights and thus cannot tell, at least from that signal alone, whether it is safe for her to cross. She makes use of other signals to do so. Each situation is different, so she must always be alert. Walking with me fills her mind with questions: where is the threshold, where is the step, where is that rubbish bin? She is focusing on a lot of practicalities, so she does not easily engage in conversations. It is mostly unintentional when she does not say 'hello' passing in the hallway. Each trajectory and each movement we make together is challenging. We must learn our way to the office, stores, school or psychologist. You cannot simply give us the address on a small piece of paper—we will not get there. She needs a lot more details, including GPS instructions. Is there a pedestrian tunnel or crossroads? A route does not just end at the front door: where is the doorbell? It is highly annoying to miss the icons and enter the doctor's consultation room instead of the waiting room. It is a never-ending process. She focuses on the area of her living space and starts a life-long learning experience.

Initially, there will always be someone with me to introduce her and inform them about the techniques for holding me while maneuvering streets or taking stairways, interpreting the sensations I give and getting to know how to inform others. This person is trained to support her, to take an active role: carrying me, presenting me, going somewhere 'alone' and receiving a response. I cannot escape the attempt to cure and compensate for blindness in many different ways, with ocular-centrism as an irrevocable standard in our society. When she is labeled 'independent', it is because of my presence. An occupational therapist, or an orientation and mobility instructor, has the expertise to educate her. She must do exercise trajectories a few times together before she can do it alone; alone with me. Therefore, she requires someone who recognizes what she actually sees. Today, her partner knows from experience what he must tell her: landmarks such as a blue door, a red-colored house, or an entrance with parking spaces. With me, she seems to know where she is going, and she really does.

Ever since she chose to use me in particular situations, she must deal with everyone's panic in the face of ambiguity. When we are somewhere together, her disability is no longer hidden. Of course, when I am there, people understand she sees differently with her eyes. The other way around, when she does not use me, people have no way of knowing that she sees less or differently. I am mistakenly seen as something to grab or point with, but my holder has my ownership and (little joke) they will not see when someone does this. It is tricky for a sighted person to understand that I am a supportive tool to enlarge the field of her perception but also that, sometimes, I do nothing. She is not faking blindness when she is not constantly using me. For example, we can be escorted to the airport departure gate and at the same time she can check messages on her phone. She is not faking blindness when she walks fluently with me, without constantly bumping into edges or obstacles. In known places, I am there for unexpected situations. I am present in visually confusing situations such as bank counters, airports, hotel lobbies and department stores, where her hesitation or questions with an obvious visual answer may prompt people to impatiently snap at her.

In the early days, she saw me as an unwanted 'thing'; she found 'that' terrible and unnecessary. But finally, she calls me 'hers'. I feel appreciated when she talks about 'my cane'. We have a personal connection. We have cultivated, and are cultivating, our relationship in intimate contexts. It is often only both of us. When there are others around, I am still latently with her. She would describe us as a romantic touch, her hand and my handle make contact at a usual meeting point. Her index finger and my smooth body are in synergy with each other. Her strongly coordinating brain is a match made in heaven with my Cupid's arrow pointer that caresses the earth. We are playing a duet. Inspired by Healey (2021), I would introduce myself by saying: I, a bejeweled sparkling cane, am the source of a rhythmic jazz-like sound (a snap slide rhythm) as my holder follows me and walks scatting overtop my sound. I am the extension of my holder's body through their hand, like a conductor's baton which makes music itself and we perform a dance together. Compositions grow in the interactions between her, me and the many surfaces of the environment. Thereby, we adore the beautiful ground on which we perform as well. From her perspective, the environment is not visible, only my tip and a pixel of the ground are in her sight. I love the ground and its variation of textures that can make many smells, voices and colors sensible.

In many situations, she finds it more convenient to leave me and maneuver through space using something or someone else. At home or at her office, she discovers the residential area and memorizes points to be careful at and recognize, moving with the touch of her hands. The coziness of these places makes me redundant, but she chooses not to use the aids! As a teenager, for example, she wore lenses instead of dark glasses. This physically limited bright light so that she could use her sight optimally but was also psychologically important to hide her impairment. She puts me in her backpack whenever she considers me 'unnecessary', as an umbrella during sunshine, because I effectively eliminate the use of one arm. Then she walks closely to her partner, holds his arm or commands the guide dog to follow him. Friends pick her up when she leaves home, without me. She relies on her mother or her sister to take her somewhere. Walking together with someone, she is not (always) aware of her location or the presence of buses, guided lines, rubber and studded tiles. Walking with me in these places, she could better localize herself and move independently but she does not take me at all or put me away as soon as she does not need me.

She leaves me behind, puts me away, and would rather be without me; I could guess she is ashamed because that is not what companions do to each other. By (carelessly) sidelining me, she seems to be unaware of my added value but perhaps she has a wider repertoire of options to explore. She is used to being guided, to waiting for others to accompany her. It is as easy as intertwining arms and being gone. It is joyful to go with the flow and express confidence in someone else. It is easier to engage in conversations. Moreover, she argues that I would hinder their walking together, that she would want to feel with the cane and slow them down. She wants to be part of the group, an activity or public life.

The assistive presence of a guide dog or acquaintance can provide comfort as her attention is not needed to focus, with massive effort, ongoing with the flow. However, since she has used a guide dog, the assistance of her partner has also become redundant. Imagine—both of us hanging on the coat rack. She dares more with her dog than with me. She feels less alone with an animal than a non-human object. 'That's someone with a dog' sounds better than 'that's a blind with a stick'. She thinks that a dog is associated more with independence, although I also enable her to move on her own. When people comment, 'That's a helping dog who assists that person' or 'With that cane, that person feels where she is walking', she is happy. She smiles in the direction of the comment because the focus is turned on how she participates in the world rather than on what she is not able to do.

Most of the time, we relate positively to each other. She is really convinced of my use. She prefers others to know she is visually impaired rather than thinking something else. It is visible, it is on the table, and it is not the proverbial elephant in the room. She now wants to try everything with me first, living on the edge. After intense practice, we now do everything together and that is her freedom. She spontaneously meets friends, folds me up and it does not matter when we go home. She takes trips to meet and be with other people. That is another way of interacting and connecting. She does not run with the group anymore and for us it is good. She experiences the mix of walking with other people, getting acquainted with a guide dog and doing the same things alone with me. Solely, my presence is not sufficient, she also needs her seeing brain and a shoulder to lean on. She is never alone, and she is always more in a togetherness, connected in respectful love with each other. The strength of interdependency is something I thankfully learned from being with her in blindness.

DISCUSSION

Based on the counter-narrative with the white cane as the protagonist, we could state that the white cane is more than an obstacle-detecting aid, more than an extension of someone's body or the lack that it compensates for, and more than a symbolizing and stigmatizing materiality to cure, compensate or rehabilitate the inability to see (Allan 1999; Backman 2024; Bulk et al. 2020; Crossland 2024; Godin 2021; Healey 2021; Kleege 2018; Kudlick 2009; Michalko 1998; Omansky 2006; Thompson n.d.). A white cane is a recognizable public sign of blindness, but it is not always used or not used with the same motivation. Being blind but having sight, (not) using a white cane, (not) having a guide dog, (not) wearing dark glasses or utilizing them differently 'disturbs or disrupts' the supposedly 'normal' order of things (Michalko and Goodley 2023).

Entering the thing-power of the white cane makes visible the 'swarm of vitalities at play' (Bennett 2010, 32; in Davies 2021) in everyday interactions with blindness. This holds the promise for people to break open normative metanarratives of blindness and start responding to the liveliness of the world where blindness belongs. We deconstructed the metanarrative 'all blind people always use a white cane'. Not 'all' people use a cane, not 'all blind' people, not 'only blind' people and not 'always'. There are many interpretations of what blindness is, how it is experienced, and how it changes over time depending on the situation. We need to be careful of monolithic understandings of blindness—it cannot be taken for granted that we all understand the same things when we see a person with a white cane. Stated vice versa, not using a white cane does not mean that the person is not blind; for some, it is just not the way. Depending on the situation, circumstances, goals and co-creation with the material and the non-material world, other presentations of ways of moving through the world become opportune and valid. The white cane is not 'always' the protagonist. It is part of a repertoire and the person has a lot of alternatives for being in and navigating through the world and these can change over time.

There remains more to tell, more in the sense of Michalko (Tichkosky et al. 2022, xxix) when he said, 'Disability is always more – it provokes us to reconsider the meaning of disability. We are committed to revealing the "more"'. The white cane needs to be understood as a process wherein multiple ambiguities and dynamics flow over time and interfere with each other. There is more to tell: it is a relationship that grows and changes, a relationship not only between the white cane and the person who uses it but also with the ground, the world around them, other people and what is asked of them. The white cane -with all its meanings- is an integral part of an assemblage called blindness and is always entangled with its user, allies and the material environment. Moments of stumbling and clumsiness when practicing happen but, at the same time, using the white cane manifests independent moveability. It is not the only way to achieve movement: it is a cumulation of and the guide dog and the cane and the colleague and… always in other circumstances and for other reasons.

The user's perception of the cane also changes over time: from a functional object that affects resistance to something relational that affects affirmation of blindness. The linguistic way of addressing the cane shifts, from 'that unwanted, unnecessary thing' to a personal-possessive pronoun. It is an extension of the person's finger, and it gives access to information on the ground, including obstacles and textures. It opens up sensory knowledge that is not always available or noticeable to every able-bodied person. Initially, the white cane represents non-human materiality that is hierarchically excluded in comparison with humans and animals (Michalko and Goodley 2023); however, it is valued over time. The competitive atmosphere disappears and the cane is appreciated for its enabling creativity. The interdependency of the person and the white cane provides elements of choice, freedom and spontaneity that are experienced as an intimate performance. The aid becomes a flexible companion. The static connotations open up to rhythmic movements.

CONCLUSION

When we give up our epistemological domination of the white cane—when we take distance of what we think we know about it, when we stop to try to make the white cane fit our metanarratives—that is when we encounter the power of the white cane to affect and be affected in multiplicity (Bennett 2010; in Davies 2021). That is when we experience what assemblages can do and become (Bansel and Davies 2014).

The white cane accompanies the person and their blindness; it enables a movement into experiences of blindness. The white cane matters to blindness. It is an entrance for illustrating what becomes possible when someone is visually impaired, in contrast with the stereotypical idea of blindness as a lack. We cannot get stuck on a simplistic representation of blindness that understands the white cane as a quick and easy way of symbolizing a visual impairment. The narrative details show relational and affective entanglements, between the blind person, the materiality of the white cane, and societal interactions (Whitburn and Riffo-Salgado 2024). The narrative shows the complexity and entanglements of interactions, perceptions and interpretations and makes us understand that there is always more to tell.

The white cane, with its numerous underlying resonances that appear in this narrative, is an example of how a person with a visual impairment is invited to move differently through the world and invites others to move along with them. The white cane in its multiplicity, de-centers the human being and provides a new context for blindness that surpasses any conventional understanding of what blindness might mean. By unpacking blindness, we find a lot more than the absence of sight, dependence and the need for support. We find movement, assemblages, relationality, companionship, interconnectedness and learning opportunities for all people involved. The person, their blindness and their white cane will guide the way. Let us take the risk of following along, listening and stumbling on obstacles once in a while.

ETHICS AND CONSENT

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the research ethics committees of Ghent University's Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, and of the Ghent University Hospital (BC-10661). Informed consent was obtained from the participants, and this study adhered to a longer process of ongoing consent in the form of relational ethics as well.

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The authors have no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

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