

Eline Pollaert – Transcript Translation (ENG)

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Welcome to Met Terugwerkende Kracht ('with retroactive force'), a podcast and audio tour from Utrecht University in honour of International Women's Day. We are podcasters Corinne Heyrman, Marieke van der Ven, and Jozien Wijkhuijs, and we are taking you on a tour of Utrecht. Along the way, we will make stops at places with an underexposed history and listen to people with a story to tell. We learn about the history of intersectional feminism in the city and at the university. At this stop, public historian Eline Pollaert talks about disability activism in Utrecht and at the university.

There is a kind of narrative, a story, that is especially prevalent in the media but also in how we talk to each other, that *despite* one's disability – that you have *overcome* disability; that you don't let anything stop you. I let a lot of things 'stop' me because my body just says 'no' at a certain point, and there is nothing wrong with that.

My name is Eline Pollaert, I am thirty years old, and I work at the Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Office at Utrecht University. I am also a researcher and consultant in the field of diversity and inclusion, and, of course, disability – because I also do research on disability, especially the history of disability in the Netherlands. This year, in 2022, I am going to start a PhD project alongside some other colleagues at Leiden University, where we are going to record the story of *Het Dorp*. *Het Dorp*, in Arnhem, is a residential community for people with disabilities that came into being in the early 1960s, and which was really very unique for its time – and it still exists today. It was a kind of pioneering project in, what they call in English, independent living. But the history of that community has never been recorded, so it's up to me and my colleagues to start sharing that story, inside and outside the country.

What I think is really cool about this audio tour is that, yes, it's about Utrecht as a city, but it also about Utrecht as a university town. What's really cool is that Utrecht has been, and still is, a focal point in the disability movement and the emancipation of people with disabilities. This includes both large organisations that are based in Utrecht, such as the Gehandicaptentraad (Council for the People with Disabilities) which has now merged into Ieder(in), and Solgu, one of those groups that really puts in effort.

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Eline is a researcher but also someone who has lived experience with disability. That is why she is sitting at home, in front of her computer, during this interview.

And that's because I am disabled myself, and I am in a high-risk group. At the time of recording – we are now in February 2022, the figures are through the roof in terms of [COVID-19] infections. I don't share my diagnosis out of principle, the idea behind that being: whatever is exactly "wrong", in quotation marks, with me, is not that relevant. What I want to draw attention to is the fact that the world is largely responsible for disabling me. The biggest obstacle I face is a world that is not designed for me, and people like me.

It's always quite tense when I'm in Utrecht. It's always very busy, and I use a cane and orthopaedic shoes. I'm not super stable, so all these beautiful cobblestones and winding streets with very narrow, historical pathways are not my greatest friends, so to say.

Next to my salaried job, I also do a lot of unpaid work. Namely, as an activist. I am a historian by trade, but the two fields inform each other; one cannot exist without the other. What I do in my research I take into my activism with me, and what I pick up in my activism I try to practice in my

research. The specific term for this is *publiekshistoricus* (public historian); I use the past to help create a vision of the future, indeed, a vision to strive for, to shape it – to, in any case, at least inform it. One of the ways in which I am engaged is through my work as part of a collective called, Feminists Against Ableism (*feministen tegen validisme*). Ableism here refers to the exclusion of people with disabilities in any way, shape or form, and what I think is crucial is that it is feminist and anti-ableist activism. Because I think if you... feminism is also about men, and people who don't feel like either men and women; racism is also about white people; and ableism is just as much about nondisabled people – or, more specifically, people who are not yet disabled, you know? The longer you live, the more likely it is that at some point you will have a chronic illness, a mental illness... it's part of human diversity.

And so, in that sense, I don't think feminism is complete if it does not concern itself also with disability.

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Her work as a historical researcher cannot be separated from her work as an activist. There are many lessons to be learned from history, says Eline.

But also, history is never neutral. Everything that is recorded in history books is a conscious choice. I think that is a very important point to make because in the history of disability in the Netherlands, eh, if we're really talking about disability activism, and the disability movement that has been active since the 1970s... there are people who have been activists in the field of disability in the Netherlands for more than half a century who you've never heard of, but who have made really important steps. And that's a story we don't tell because disability is supposedly something *medical*, while it actually also has a social history, just like feminism, just like anti-racism, and that's something that I would like to question as a *publiekshistoricus*, a public historian. What stories are we not retelling? And who does that serve – not sharing those stories?

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And here we are standing on the Moreelsebrug, for one such story.

It is a story from 1988, so quite a while ago. Around that time, the NS [Dutch Railways] was busy acquiring new trains, and a youth movement for and by young people with disabilities, JOPLA was the name of the group, which had been talking to the NS for some time about: *hey, we also want to be able to travel by train independently, we currently have to give a working day's notice, a 24-hours' notice at the latest, that we want to travel by train. We just want to be able to go out with our friends and family independently.* So they had been talking about the inaccessibility of trains for some time, and the NS was going to buy new trains, and so yes, now was their chance. But then nothing came of it. So, yes, these young people thought: *what the heck, we want to make a point here.* So they prepared a protest in deepest secrecy, they wrote to newspapers – it was, of course, the age before internet, 1988.

On the day itself, they drove to Utrecht Central, taking with them crutches, walkers and everything else you can imagine, and they went to platform 11. What they did is, they really rolled and walked down the train track itself, and sat down in the middle of it, holding up banners and flyers... and the whole platform was full of journalists! So there are photos of this. So, there they protested the inaccessibility of trains, with which people could not travel independently. There are very nice photos of that protest, those beautiful grainy, analogue black-and-white photos, that show a group of really angry young people, holding up very sharp banners, so to say. What I think is so cool about this is that, for example, there exists a photo

that was taken from the perspective of the protesting youth, so you're standing in the middle of the track, looking past the wheelchairs, looking straight into the headlights of the train that was waiting at that platform and could not move any further. So you look to the right, yes, into the train itself, and I think that's a really powerful image. It is an image that one doesn't normally associate with disability; you don't see many disabled people being angry in the news – and in not one of those images do you see such a person arguing with a railway police agent.

The story that is told about disability is actually very two-dimensional. On the one hand, there's the very pitying narrative of: *ah, it's so tragic that this has happened to you; you're far too young to be ill*. And on the other hand, you become a kind of inspiration porn, as it is called: the story of the person who has *overcome* his or her disability; the Paralympic athlete who does not let the loss of his or her legs stop them from going for gold. And, you know, I don't really feel at home in either of those stories. I am a human being with lovely and less lovely sides to me, and what I see in those photos in particular – and a picture says more than a thousand words, of course – I like those photos so much because they show a kind of a raised fist, a kind of self-determination. *You are not going to tell me whether I can take the train or not*. We can discuss this on a very civil basis, person to person, but if you are not going to take any steps, then I'm going to make a point – together with my friends. I think that's a very powerful image. And that, you know, that was before I was born. This protest took place, and it makes me think on the one hand, *wow* I'm standing on these people's shoulders in my own activism; and, at the same time, we are now more than 35 years on and we still can't take the train independently. So, it's also very sad.

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The next stop on the audio tour is Tivoli Vredenburg, where I talk to Rosi Braidotti about feminism in music.