Dis/entangling Critical Disability Studies[1]

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Introduction

If late-twentieth-century disability studies was associated with establishing the factors that led to the structural, economic and cultural exclusion of people with sensory, physical and cognitive impairments, then disability studies in the current century might be seen as a time of developing nuanced theoretical responses to these factors. The politicization of disabled people is at the heart of these developments. Disability activisms have brought about a host of national and pan-national responses, including the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The potency of Disabled People's International is testimony to the growing interconnectedness of the politics of disability across the globe. On the ground, disability studies have entered a host of training and educational contexts, social policies, legislative discourses and professional practices. Furthermore, disability studies have dallied with many theoretical ideas. Contemporary disability studies occupy and agitate for what Carol Thomas defines in her book *Sociologies of Disability and Illness* as a transdisciplinary space breaking boundaries between disciplines, deconstructing professional/lay distinctions and decolonizing traditional medicalized views of disability with socio-cultural conceptions of disablism. Thomas defines *disablism* as "a form of social oppression involving the social imposition of restrictions of activity on people with impairments and the socially engendered undermining of their psycho-emotional well being" (*Sociologies* 73). This definition sits alongside other forms of oppression including hetero/sexism and racism. Indeed, as explained below, the intersectional character of disability is one of a number of reasons why we might conceptualize the contemporary state of the field as *critical* disability studies.

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Critical disability studies start with disability but never end with it: Disability is *the* space from which to think through a host of political, theoretical and practical issues that are relevant to all (see Goodley 157). The emergence of a critical approach to the analysis of disability may be put down to a number of recent developments. According to Helen Meekosha and Russell Shuttleworth these include a shift in theorizing beyond the social model; the influence of disciplines previously on the outskirts, such as psychology, entering the field; attempts to challenge the dogmatic tendencies of some theories and theorists through reference to eclecticism; and the merging of Marxist accounts with those from feminism, queer and post-colonial studies. The word 'critical' denotes a sense of self-appraisal; re-assessing where we have come from, where we are at and where we might be going. For Margrit Shildrick critical disability studies rethink the conventions, assumptions and aspirations of research, theory and activism in an age of postmodernity (see "Critical"). Disability studies, at least in Britain, were conceived as a modern day project to challenge capitalist conditions of alienation. Critical disability studies build upon these insights but acknowledge that we are living in a time of complex identity politics, of huge debates around the ethics of care, political and theoretical appeals to the significance of the body, in a climate of economic downturn that is leading yet again to reformulations of what counts as disabled. These contemporary events pose critical questions about the usefulness of dominant theories of disability. In short, are ideas developed in the 1990s or before still relevant to our current late capitalist or postmodernist times? This paper builds on the work of Meekosha, Shuttleworth, Shildrick and others to offer an inevitably personal and therefore selective account of a number of emerging analytical insights from critical disability studies.

Theorizing through Materialism

It is an imperative to recognize and celebrate Marxism's contribution to disability studies. Critical disability studies owe a debt to the many activists and scholars that unearthed the structural foundations of oppression faced by disabled people. In Britain, the materialist social model of disability might be now viewed as a product of the twentieth century: a modernist response to the socio-economic exclusion of disabled people from everyday life. Key writers such as Mike Oliver, Colin Barnes and Vic Finkelstein unashamedly drew on neo-Marxist and Gramscian analyses of material barriers to work, education and community living experienced in everyday, often mundane, ways by disabled people. In contexts where anti-discriminatory legislation was still only a dream, their analyses were a clarion call to activists and academics alike to overturn the material conditions of disablement. Rather than changing attitudes or pushing for the mainstreaming of disability issues, materialist

social modellists, as Carol Thomas defines them (see *Sociologies*), politicized disability and sought to address material needs via increased socio-political participation (see Oliver *Politics*). Vic Finkelstein's influential analysis – summarized in Goodley (61-62) – maintained that while early capitalism offered some inclusion in the community through disabled people's involvement in small-scale cottage industries, the rapid growth of manufacturing and machinery supplanted their contribution to a growing labour force. The middle phase of capitalist development saw manufacturing industries such as coal and steel expanding. Mass migration from rural to urban areas increased exponentially. Industrialization deskilled and impoverished disabled people who had previously worked in agrarian communities. Many disabled people, deemed incapable of offering labour, quickly joined the unemployed in the cities. Industrialization demanded fit workers. Factories exposed uncompetitive workers. Institutionalization provided a means of controlling non-viable workers and, in contrast, developed new forms of labour for those working in them. Later forms of capitalism, marked by the growth of the human service industry, offered more opportunities for consumer groups and disabled people's organizations to challenge their exclusion from mainstream life. There is no doubt that disability would have lacked recognition as a political phenomenon without this materialist rationale.

Critical disability studies emerged, in part, according to Meekosha and Shuttleworth, in reaction to the dominance of this materialist stance. For some, such as Tom Shakespeare (see *Disability Rights*), the social model had become a shibboleth; a dogmatic totalizing epistemology against which all disability research was expected to judge itself. Any deviation from the materialist social model risked being dismissed for watering down the politics of disability (see Oliver "Hammer;" Barnes). It is no surprise that materialist disability studies found homes in sociology and social policy departments. Yet, as the end of the twentieth century approached, it was very clear that critical disability studies were being developed in other social science disciplines including psychology, social work, education and the humanities. Materialism appeared to explain only so much for researchers working in these disciplines. Scholars from critical and community psychology, for example, whilst sharing a view of disablism as fundamentally a socio-economic problem (and in some cases identifying themselves as Marxists), also recognized that marginalization is a relational concept, emerging in the routines of (and interactions between) non-disabled and disabled people, often experienced in deeply psychological ways (see Marks; Parker; Kagan et al.). For researchers from the humanities, trained in post-Marxist theories such as poststructuralism and post-colonialism, materialist social model theories were deemed old-fashioned and out of tune with the ever more complex nature of disablism. David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, for example, recognized the need to develop an analysis of the cultural

locations of disability that evoked sites of violence, restriction, confinement and absence of liberty for disabled people. While attentive to the lessons learnt from materialism, these cultural modellists (see Goodley) developed analyses of the ways in which representations of disability and impairment are manufactured by charities, science and popular culture in ways that *dis*-locate disabled people (Snyder and Mitchell, *Locations* 19). An overview of the cultural turn is provided by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson ("Integrating" 2). She posits that disability is a cultural trope and historical community that raises questions about the materiality of the body and the social formulations that are used to interpret bodily and cognitive differences. Affiliated scholars "rejected a firm distinction between impairment and disability because they viewed biology and culture as impinging upon one another" (Goodley 14). Looking back over the last decade it is possible to recognize the emergence of critical disability studies that are less centred around the materialist imperative and open to a host of theoretical developments including post-conventionist (Shildrick *Dangerous*); postmodernist (Corker and Shakespeare) and poststructuralist (Tremain). Each of these persuasions emphasizes the cultural, discursive and relational undergirdings of the disability experience. The variegated nature of critical disability studies theory led Lennard Davis to confidently define the contemporary field as *dismodernist*: where disability links together other identities as *the* moment of reflection. For Davis, disabled people are *the* ultimate intersectional subject, the universal image, the important modality through which we can understand exclusion and resistance. Indeed, the fact that disability absorbs the fetishized and projected insecurities of the precariously 'able-bodied' suggests that disability studies scholars are in a key position to challenge a host of oppressive practices associated with dominant hegemony of able society. A point we will return to later.

Bodies that Matter

One of the initial contributions of twentieth-century disability studies was to sever the causal link between the body and disability. As a direct riposte to medicalized and psychologized hegemonies of disability – that sited disability as a personal tragedy, biological deficiency and psychical trauma – disability studies relocated disability to social, cultural, economic and political registers. Having an impaired body did not equate with disability. In contrast, disability was a problem of society. While a strong sociological analysis of disability became ever more accepted in disability circles, questions still abounded about the absent presence of the impaired body. While disabled feminists such as Sally French, Liz Crow, Mairian Corker, Carol Thomas and Donna Reeve had made a strong case for the inclusion of discussions about impairment, Tom Shakespeare's book *Disability Rights and Wrongs* was perhaps the most concerted

and controversial attempt to address the question: what about impairment? For Shakespeare the body had been denied in disability studies because the (materialist) social model had bracketed impairment by means similar to the ways in which biological difference had been denied by some feminists in the 1970s (see Goodley 28). He argued that impairments are important because some are static, others episodic, some degenerative and others terminal. Hence, a social model can only explain so much before we need to return to the experiential realities of 'impairment' as object(s) independent of knowledge (see Shakespeare 54). Impairment *is* a predicament and *can* be tragic. This critical realist conception of the body has been taken up by Tobin Siebers and is well represented in the collection by Kristiana Kristiansen, Simo Vehmas, and Tom Shakespeare. These interventions publicized many long-standing private misgivings about the lack of consideration given to the biological within disability studies circles. Realists have left an indelible mark on the field addressing what might be termed the somatophobic tendencies of disability studies.

While the realist turn has been powerful – allowing the body to resurface as a significant element of the disability experience – other critical disability studies theorists have addressed the corporeality of disability in order to emphasize the impaired body as social body. It is quite clear that when we start to scrutinize the disabled or impaired body, its reality soon breaks down (see Campbell *Contours*). For Anita Ghai (*Forms* 147), disabled bodies risk becoming dis-embodied because of constructions around them that threaten to create a total invisibility of the disabled individual. At the same time, however, as Anne McGuire argues: "disability marks the body in ambiguous ways – it appears and disappears, is noticed and is hidden – as we move through different physical and social spaces, and as we find ourselves in different political and historical moments" (n. pag.). The work of Margrit Shildrick extends this idea of the fluid social body. Shildrick's post-conventionalist approach to embodiment refutes any simple biological/social division and, instead, recasts the body as a complex site of cultural and corporeal production. Owing much to the work of Judith Butler and Gilles Deleuze, Shildrick demands us to think about the ways in which non-normative bodies are performative entities illuminating but also potentially refuting corporeal standards. Disabled bodies challenge normative ideas of able bodies. This can be productive. Indeed impaired embodiment demands new, inclusive and potentially exciting forms of response from others.

Disability as possibility (see McKenzie) has been taken further by phenomenological disability studies (e.g. Michalko; Titchkosky). Phenomenologists attend to the capacities of the body to be a source of self and society. The work of Bill Hughes and Kevin Paterson has been particularly significant in reinserting the body back into sociologies of disability. A "carnal sociology" has emerged, theorizing the body as *the* place where self and society interact (Goodley 56).

Bodies do matter for critical disability studies. The question, however, is how do bodies matter or, perhaps more accurately, how do they become materialized: that is, made to matter? An answer to this question is provided by Rod Michalko in his book *The Two-in-One: Walking with Smokie, Walking with Blindness*. The partnership with his dog Smokie allows Michalko to rethink conventional essentialist understandings of blindness (as individually deficient, lacking sight and therefore inevitably disabled). In contrast, his blindness becomes revised through his relationship with Smokie as an intimate, sustained and in-depth experience of walking through blindness with a companion guide dog. Hence, his embodiment and that of Smokie's become deeply connected and blurred to the extent that the phenomenology of blindness is significantly reshaped and refashioned. Bodies are lived in; but in the social settings that they inhabit. Michalko supports this argument when he writes:

"Smokie and I move through our world *alone together*; focusing on one another in the midst of the plurality of our world and its many blindnesses. Smokie keeps me company in this estranged familiarity of opinion. I experience my blindness *together* with Smokie in this plurality. My focus is on Smokie and on myself. The world we generate springs from our communication in the midst of the world and from our movements through it." (186)

Michalko's phenomenological account is one in which sense, connection and community are necessarily entangled. A further exploration of the tangled nature of bodies is provided by poststructuralist critical disability studies scholars (see Tremain; Shildrick *Dangerous*). In *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, Judith Butler asked a number of questions of bodies (see 243), which we can appropriate in reference to disability:

"How are non-disabled bodies made more seemingly viable and desirable than non-disabled bodies? How do societal practices uphold the precarious higher status of non-disabled people through the abjection (rejection) of disabled people? In what ways do disabled bodies rearticulate what qualifies as a body that matters?" (Goodley 159)

The body is, for the poststructuralist feminist Rosi Braidotti, neither a biological nor sociological category (see Braidotti 44). Instead, she conceptualizes it as an interface, a threshold, a field where intersecting material and symbolic forces converge; a surface where multiple codes of sex, class, age, race, and so forth, are inscribed. The normative body is understood as being fashioned and materialized through cultural, political and social conditions ranging from surgery to self-help. The non-normative body – a body that appears as an object of fear and curiosity – is therefore considered an opportunity to think through values, ethics and politics that congregate around such bodies. In this

sense, any intimate bodily function is also a function of a body within given standards of embodiment. A body that sticks out – that challenges conventions and standards – permits a moment of disruption and a chance to ask, what counts as a valued body? Through these reflections, non-normative bodies are recast as unique embodied entities through which we can consider how bodies should and *could* be lived (see Overboe). This entanglement is advanced by our next theme of critical disability studies.

Inter/Trans-sectionality

There is no doubt that disability studies have struggled for recognition from other transformative arenas such as feminism, critical race, Marxist and queer theory. The absence of disability issues led Maureen Olkin to ask 'When will disabled people be allowed to board the diversity train?' (see 136). Rather than waiting for the good intentions of others, critical disability studies is characterized by an unwillingness to be ignored by potential theoretical and political allies and a proactive drive to connect and influence these allies. This has led to a number of intersectional engagements. For Gerard Goggin this inter-sectionality is hardly surprising when one considers the ways in which disability is directly wrapped up with other categories of difference, experiences of marginality and forms of political activism (n. pag.). Disability studies have a long history of engaging with other minority groups as demonstrated by Paul Hunt:

> "What I am rejecting is society's tendency to set up rigid standards of what is right and proper, to force the individual into a mould. Our constant experience of this pressure towards unthinking conformity in some way relates us to other obvious deviants [*sic*] and outcasts like the Jew in a gentile world, a negro [*sic*] in a white world, homosexuals, the mentally handicapped [*sic*]; and also to more voluntary rebels in every sphere – artists, philosophers, prophets, who are essentially subversive elements in our society." (151)

Intersectionality is not simply about bringing together these markers but to consider how each supports or unsettles the constitution of one another. Intersectionality seeks to explore convergence and divergence of multiple markers. This involves difficult conversations across socio-cultural categories and forms of interpellation to ask how, for example, disability, gender, race, sexuality and class constitute or contradict one another. Historically, following Goodley (35), disability and femininity have been coupled, as mad, bad and ill women's bodies are categorized through conditions such as premenstrual tension, hysteria, post-natal depression and Munchausen's syndrome by proxy (see Campbell, *Contours* 100). At the same time, we know that men's criminality is distinguished as bad rather than mad, thus separating amorality from an

essentialist diagnosis. Disability is constructed through direct recourse to these gendered norms and sexist practices (see Goodley 36). To think of dis/ability we need also to be cognisant of fe/male. This has led Garland-Thomson to argue that a cross-referencing of feminist and critical disability studies perspectives elicits new insights or *reimaginings* for feminists and disability activists alike, "because prevailing narratives constrict disability's complexities they not only restrict the lives and govern the bodies of people we think of as disabled, but they limit the imaginations of those who think of themselves as non-disabled" ("Feminist" 1567). These limits on the imagination – experienced by disabled and non-disabled alike – are taken further by Fiona Kumari Campbell in her grounding-breaking work on ableism.

Campbell's *Contours of Ableism* has had far-reaching influence on the field of critical disability studies, perhaps because her work is an elegant example of intersectional analysis. Her work shifts attention away from the problems of disablism ('the Other') to the problems of ableism ('the same' or 'the dominant'). As soon as disability emerges as a site of otherness and marginality, then so too do 'Other' identities, performances and processes. Ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality and pan-national identities converge around the problems of disability as a consequence of attempts to maintain what Campbell terms ableist normativity (see *Contours*). Disabled people, women, children, queer, people of colour and poor people share an Other space to that of the dominant same that is founded upon ableist, heteronormative, adult, white European and North American, high-income nation's values. For McGuire, "disability marks different bodies in different and relational ways; systems of ableism come into contact with racialized bodies, queer bodies, classed bodies, gendered bodies, bodies that already have been touched by other (and perhaps multiple) systems of oppression" (n. pag.). One of the key tasks of critical disability studies, following Campbell in *Contours of Ableism*, is to explain how these conditions of dominance crisscross in ways that promote values and, simultaneously, justify forms of oppression such as disablism, racism, homophobia and orientalism that negate the existence of Others.

One fruitful arena of work to emerge out of intersectional analysis can be found at the merging of queer and disability studies. Mark Sherry asks: How is queerness evoked in the construction of disability? How is disability evoked in the construction of queerness? These questions, alongside others, have been addressed by Robert McRuer through his development of "crip theory." Drawing largely on ideas from queer theory, McRuer explores the ways in which forms of 'compulsory' hetero-normativity and ablebodiedness merge at sites of domination such as the family, the school and the workplace. McRuer adapts Adrienne Rich's concept of 'compulsory heterosexuality' to develop the notion of 'compulsory able-bodiedness:' an imbricated system interwoven with the system of compulsory heterosexuality. Following Goodley, the most

successful heterosexual subject is one whose sexuality is not compromised by the 'disability' of being queer and the most successful able-bodied subject is the one whose ability is not compromised by the 'queerness' of disability (see 41). Compulsory ablebodiedness functions by covering over, with the appearance of choice, a system in which there is actually no choice (ibid.). Yet while conditions of domination are exposed, crip theory re-emphasizes the potentiality of a queer reading of disability. The disabled body, then, is not only a site of oppression but (like all forms of oppression) always contradictory and therefore full of the promise of potentiality. Disabled people occupy *cripping* positions of subversion, connection and reappraisal precisely because they embody Other positions to those demanded by ableist cultures. A crip position has been advanced by Jim Overboe in his discussion of his own disabled body as a crip body. His account of his body rejects the stereotypical disabled body as deficient, and refigures it as a place of becoming, reflection and production (see Goodley 158). Overboe describes his spasms (normatively and medically understood as a sign of the negative affliction of his Cerebral Palsy) as creative elements of his embodiment (queerly understood as productive, creative, physical attributes). Similarly, Amy Vidali's reappropriation of the term "spastic colon" as an alternative to irritable bowel syndrome recasts her normatively understood deficient body as a body that crips how we understand reasonable, appropriate, contained bodies of contemporary life (n. pag.). This draws us into a very specific embodied arena associated with 'odour poetics;' the rhetorics of bodily control associated with 'the politics of shit' (see ibid.). Her spastic colon demands others to think again about the kinds of constraints and expectations ableism demands of its reasonable bodies. Overboe and Vidali powerfully extend what we might term a *trans-sectional* engagement with ableism; articulating what it might mean to embody the counter-hegemonic of crip lives. Trans-sectionality, following Robert Kulpa, captures the disruptive, boundary-breaking, paradigm shifting nature of the crip/queer body and identity; recasting it as a place of possibility. This position fits with Franz Fanon's call for "agents provocateurs and counter subversion" (*Skins* 108-109) because "we only become what we are by the radical and deep-seated refusal of that which others have made us" (Sartre, preface to Fanon's *Wretched* 15).

'Global' Disability Studies

Much of the work I have cited has been written in the minority-world, Global North, Western European and North American high-income nations. Yet critical disability studies have become ever more sensitized to – and to some extents, representational of – disability theory emerging from the Global South. Helen Meekosha, for example, combines anglocentric social model analyses of class with North American cultural studies of colonial settler communities

but finding neither suitable for explaining disability in indigenous Australian Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders communities. Countries at the periphery of the English speaking world, such as India, South Africa and Asia-Pacific rim nations, require analyses of disability that reflect their own specific colonial-settler histories (Meekosha, "Drifting" 725). Meekosha questions the implicit values of Northern hemisphere disability studies, including claims to universality (what happens in the Global North should happen in the South); a reading from the metropole (a methodological projection of ideas from the centre into the periphery); emphasis on the importance of northern feudal/capitalist modes of production (with an accompanying ignorance and grand erasure of indigenous/traditional modes of living of the South); a colonialism of psychic, cultural and geographical life of the South by the North; and ignorance of the resistant-subaltern positions of 'Global Southerners' (see Meekosha, "Contextualizing" n.pag.).

Shaun Grech seeks to challenge the shortcomings implicit in the assumptions of Global North disability studies by contextualizing a consideration of a Global South concerns. He reminds us that, for example in Latin America, we need to be mindful of the oppression of indigenous people; the decolonization and formation of new nation-states with the ensuing exploitation and exclusion of minority workers; violent struggles that have increased the movement of refugees and racialized conflicts that have increased the difficult position of these new migrant workers. Consequently, the goal for many Global South disability activists has been basic survival (see Ghai). Concerns associated with educational inclusion, human rights and the development of positive disability cultures might be of less importance to people who are living a hand to mouth existence (Goodley 37).

That said, the complex interweaving of disabled and post-colonized identities has been captured in very nuanced ways. Jude McKenzie, writing from a South African context, and Anita Ghai writing from an Indian perspective, have each demonstrated the hybridized nature of culture, economics and politics and its impact upon the lives of disabled people. Ghai's work is an exemplary account of tradition, history, (post)colonization and (post)modernity on the Indian psyche of disabled and non-disabled people. While mindful of the realities of poverty, colonization and caste/class in India, as a critical psychologist, Ghai is interested in the varying ways in which the subjectivities are constituted through culture. Impairment, she argues, is a "material-semiotic phenomenon dependent upon one's relationships with others and their relationship with you" (*Forms* 128). She goes on:

> "The internalisation that I carried in such a cultural milieu [India] accustomed me to seeing my disability as a personal quest and tragedy to be borne alone. [...] I learnt to

cope with the limitations, imposed by my impairment. The recurring anxiety was placed in the realm of what Freud so aptly termed as the 'unconscious.'" (*Forms* 14-15)

A global critical disability studies must be ever mindful of connecting across nation-states that recognize specific socio-historical conditions of oppression alongside wider considerations of the globalization of disablism.

The Self and the Other

A key site of the oppression of disabled people pertains to those moments when they are judged to fail to match up to the ideal individual. Susanne Mintz makes the point that social discourses around disability are not about disability at all (see 162). Rather, they relate to the need to guarantee the privileged status of the non-disabled individual; "a need that, in its turn, emerges from fears about the fragility and unpredictability of embodied identity" (ibid.). Similarly, Deb Marks observes that disabled people constitute a huge problem for non-disabled society precisely because they disrupt the normative individual: The person that dribbles, Marks comments, disrupts a culture that emphasises bodily control and associated cultural norms around manners, convention and bodily comportment (see *Controversial*). An individual whose speech is difficult to understand is assumed to have a problem because they challenge a colonising stance of certainty about how people should speak. People who do not walk are understood as tragic because they do not embody the idealised mobility of the autonomous walker (see Oliver "Politics"). People with learning difficulties, who fail to meet developmentalist stages, are discarded from mainstream educational systems because of their lack of fit with educational prerogatives. Individuals who depend on – or require connections with – others to live are not individuals at all. They are burdens (see Goodley 79).

The disabled individual queers – or crips – the normative pitch of the autonomous citizen. For Braidotti our cultural landscape is split between 'his self and his many Others,' with the self of embodied man assumed to be masculine, white urbanized, speaking a standard language, heterosexually inscribed in a reproductive unit and a full citizen of a recognized polity (see 55). This is the dominant self against which we are all expected to judge our own selves. Just as the dominant self 'for the black man is the white man' (see Fanon, *Skins* 97), for the disabled person this is the non-disabled or able self (see Campbell "Exploring").

Campbell suggests that critical disability studies shift attention away from 'the disabled' onto 'the abled.' Ableist processes create a corporeal standard, which presumes ablebodiedness, inaugurates the norm and purifies the ableist ideal. When disabled people (and non-disabled people for that matter) ask 'Who am I?,' they risk being hit with the mirror of the abled self. This self looks back at

the disabled Other knowing "disabled people in deficient ways. Disabled people are their impairment. *They* are broken individuals. *They* lack development. *They* cannot do. *They* do not have the abilities to lead an independent life" (Goodley 80). This dominant self threatens to create epistemic invalidation: to make disabled people not know themselves, to become Other (for further discussion, see Wendell; Marks, "Dimensions"). The dominant ableist self is ready and willing to bring disabled people back into the norm (re/habilitate, educate) or banish them (cure, segregate) from its ghostly centre. But, following Goodley, while disabled people undoubtedly suffer the psychologization of ableism, the individual remains a key site of everyday life, oppression and perhaps resistance for *everyone* (see 81). The fashioning of our selves takes place in relation to that which we are not: other people. Moreover, as Couse Venn notes, the multiple objects of otherness allow us to cobble together an ontological sense of who we are. Hence, (disabled) people will find objects within the dominant cultural self through which to fashion their selves. Indeed, the disabled people's movement has built a strong case around human rights and human capital, in which they demand to be part of a wider more inclusive realm of independent living.

Although the disabled self sits uneasily with the narrow construction of the abled self in contemporary society, so too do many other members of society, who are judged against equally pernicious standards of worth associated with the fully functioning self of contemporary society. Indeed, we are *all* engaged in the constitution of ourselves every minute of everyday day, through our relationship with others (see Goodley 81). Our task then is, as Fanon would have it, to recapture the self from its position as Other (see *Black Skin*).

Conclusion: Dangers/Possibilities of Critical Disability Studies

If one was to compare the contemporary state of critical disability studies with disability studies from the last century, one would have to conclude that much has changed – not least – in terms of the growing theoretical confidence of this transdisciplinary community. Some scholars mourn the passing of time and suggest that, while theoretical avenues have been widened, the field has lost touch with the real material problems of disabled people's lives. A preoccupation with theory over politics seems at odds with the very real global economic crisis that threatens to place more and more disabled people in vulnerable and devalued societal positions across the world (see Barnes). Others worry that disability studies are becoming ever more comfortably settled into the academic world so that disability becomes a field of study – rather than a phenomenon around which to collectively campaign – so domesticating the previously radical origins of disability studies (see Shakespeare "Debate"). Furthermore, the moves towards postmodern and queer theories of the 'crip experience' – while celebrating the ever-morphing potential of disability – also threaten to make

disability difficult to pin down, identify with and mobilize around (see Swain). The suggestion here is that theory gets in the way of understanding the realities of disablism (see Watson). Indeed, a suggestion from one of the reviewers of this paper is that critical disability studies are in danger of becoming a new uncritical orthodoxy – one distanced from empirical evidence and often only internally critiqued. Also, if disability studies perspectives are no longer exclusively related to the discourses of the disabled people's movement – no longer associated with one strong orthodoxy or model – then one wonders whether disability studies has lost its anchoring.

In contrast, a move towards critical disability studies might be viewed as the logical consequence of disabled people and their allies unpacking and illuminating the complex nature of disability. This is not simply about academic curiosity (although some might ask what the problem is with curiosity). The themes I present above offer, I would suggest, spaces for the development of praxis: the inter-twining of activism and theory. A new generation of scholars and activists are populating these spaces utilizing cyber worlds, plugged into rhizomatic networks of relationships with others, spurning traditional fixed identity categories and realizing community membership through rich diverse connections, and have no time for static modernist theories. Critical disability studies, then, capture some of the sophisticated ways in which bodies, knowledge, and technology merge. Critical disability studies might be viewed then, following Scott Lash, as a lifted-out space: a platform or plateau through which to think through, act, resist, relate, communicate, engage with one another against the hybridized forms of oppression and discrimination that so often do not speak singularly of disability. Discrimination is an increasingly complicated entanglement of disability, gender, sexuality, nation, ethnicity, age and class. Critical disability studies have not developed simply to capture the theoretical interests of scholars, but have developed theories that are in concert with contemporary lives, the complexities of alienation and rich hopes of resistance.

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Responses to Dan Goodley

Konstantin Butz

The Promise of Potentiality

My response to Dan Goodley's paper cannot but be extremely shallow. First, because I am far from being an expert concerning the matter at hand and, second, because it seems to be impossible to adequately summarize, let alone comment on, all of the aspects that are so convincingly laid out in his text. In order to mask the superficiality of my remarks, I have opted for a rather pragmatist solution and decided to concentrate on or rather *zoom into* only a few aspects raised in Goodley's broad account of disability studies past and present. I can thus reduce the risk of getting lost in the extensive complexities that necessarily characterize the topic, while simultaneously preparing for an argument that seeks to underscore the importance of infinitesimally small phenomena which require a focused and concentrated approach.

I would like to take my cue from Goodley's remarks concerning the importance of intersectionality as a constitutive characteristic for what I read as his call for a *critical* disability studies. Referencing Carol Thomas's definition of *disablism* and drawing on Fiona Kumari Campbell's concept of *ableism*, he advances the argument that disability can be positioned "alongside other forms of oppression including hetero/sexism and racism" (Goodley 81), thus establishing the field as *in fact* intersectional and thus "relevant to all" (82). Picking up on this argument, I will offer a way in which we might employ intersectionality as a 'tool' in preparing for what could ideally turn into a 'revolutionary response' or at least a point of departure for "rich hopes of resistance," as Goodley states in concluding his article (93).

"What exactly *is* intersectionality?," we might ask, before delving into its theoretical and practical implementations. The importance of this seemingly trivial question cannot be overestimated, as it inevitably leads us to the origins of what is much more than 'just' a theoretical concept.

Intersectionality mainly developed from the African-American feminist movement originating in the 1960s (and before). In its initial setting, intersectionality uncovers in what ways working class African-American women

suffer from the ramifications of different axes of differentiation that identify them according to attributes of race, class, and gender. It reveals to what extent the struggle of these women – and other women who are discursively rendered as 'non-white' – is different from that of, say, white middle-class feminists. For reasons of space, I will not go into the details of the groundbreaking works of feminist scholars and activists such as bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, the women of the Combahee River Collective, or Kimberlé Crenshaw who coined the term *intersectionality theory* in 1989. However, at this point it can be stated that intersectionality as a concept is deeply rooted in social resistance, activism, and *black feminist thought* (as the book with the same title by Patricia Hill Collins implies).

In other words, intersectionality theory did not develop from purely academic interests, but from the real-life struggles of non-white women who had to cope with the discursive and material grip of white supremacy. It prevents what Judith Butler might call "epistemological imperialism" (18) – i.e. the assumption that one could grasp every vector of power in a single work of theoretical writing – by practically concentrating on aspects of differentiation that affect people in the setting of a white patriarchal society. In short, intersectionality neither developed from theoretical or epistemological curiosity nor from the purely intellectual aspiration to analyze complexity, but instead it arose from actual, conflictual experience and, consequently, from political necessity.

This undeniable necessity is what makes intersectionality an almost inevitable 'ally' in the development of a *critical* disability studies, as we find similar situations of political urgency at the outset of what is much more than simply an academic endeavor. As Goodley remarks in his introduction, "the politicization of disabled people is at the heart" of the developments that have led to the disciplinary formation of the field discussed in this book (81). One aspect of this formation, according to Goodley, is an approach to critical disability studies that acknowledges the complexities of postmodern conditions, among other aspects, and maybe most importantly the complexities of identity politics.

Intersectionality, I argue, can be very helpful in disentangling the highly affective vectors of differentiation that are crucial in the creation of what we perceive as our own or other people's identities, which includes the identifying attributions of 'disabled' and 'abled.' These attributions, among others, set the standard of what we perceive as normal and acceptable. If we take a closer look at how such standardizations are implemented in the realm of corporeal living, we acquire insight into the way they diminish free, or personal developments, and, most importantly, developments that are *different* from social norms. We might ask ourselves how these standards could be challenged, how they could be changed. Goodley explains that "any intimate bodily function is also a function of a body within given standards of embodiment" (87). Consequently, I propose that it is from the "intimate bodily function" that a challenging of

"given standards" could be generated. But how can we evaluate these functions? How could we form an idea of their potentiality to generate new and non-standard ways of embodiment?

This is the point where intersectionality becomes practicable, as it can accompany us on a phenomenological journey towards the intimate bodily functions that provide a corporeal interface characterized by its convergence of material and symbolic forces, as described by Goodley with reference to feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti. An intersectional analysis first and foremost uncovers differentiating categories that are used to discursively render everybody, i.e. literally *every body*, identifiable according to attributes of race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, age, ability, and so on. As I pointed out, such an analysis is politically informed and thus reveals precisely those axes of differentiation that have either oppressive or privileging effects for the body and its associated identity. We can thus use intersectional analyses to uncover and momentarily bracket these discursive (more precisely: symbolic) differentiations and approach the purely material forces that characterize bodily functions. These functions, even if infinitesimal, always include moments of corporeal movement, be it only the blood cells running through our veins.

This movement, I argue, offers the chance to resist intersectional ascriptions as, by definition, it escapes the notion of fixity and thus of fixed meaning, of fixed identity. It is within ephemeral moments of movement that we enter fluid modes of becoming or, to reference Goodley's reference to the works of Margrit Shildrick, it is in these moments that we inhabit a "fluid social body" which potentially refutes "corporeal standards" (85).

Let me use an example to elucidate the importance of such moments: In *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Clifford Geertz introduces the potential of what he calls a "thick description" by referring to Gilbert Ryle's account of "two boys rapidly contracting the eyelids of their right eyes" (6). It is certainly not merely by chance that Geertz emphasizes the boys' actions as "movements" (of the eyelids), which only by reading them through "a public code" can be differentiated as either "twitch" or "wink" (ibid.). He thus reintegrates the importance of movement into any analysis of human being (and becoming). As apparently identical movements, the "'phenomenalistic' observation of them alone" would not reveal the significance of one movement as a mere contraction and the other one as a purposeful wink. It is only in "a public code [that the contraction of eyelids] counts as a conspiratorial sign" (ibid.). Either way, the factual physicality of *movement* pervades the situation as a matter of presence, which is subsequently, and maybe even simultaneously, enhanced (or could we say: constrained?) through a cultural interpretation in the form of a thick description. Geertz summarizes: "That's all there is to it: a speck of behavior, a fleck of culture, and *voilà!*—a gesture" (ibid.).

It is this notion of a *gesture* (and the "fleck of culture" it embodies) that is important for our discussion. Just as with the "public code" that turns a "twitch" into a "wink" and thus a gesture, it seems to be the discursive power of the differentiating categories of intersectionality that classifies people's corporeal movements within notions of ability and disability. (Corporeal) movements always happen within a cultural matrix and are interpreted, read, and coded according to normative standards. They are, one could say, always read as gestures.

Let us take a look at a few of the examples that Goodley invokes in his paper: The "person that dribbles," an "individual whose speech is difficult to understand," "people who do not walk," he points out, all disrupt "a culture that emphasises bodily control" and thus, in the broadest sense they deviate from the culturally standardized norms of movement (91). But what if we – at least momentarily – stop to read these movements as gestures? What if we push aside the intersectional differentiations providing the public code through which we read corporeal living? What if we refuse to read a twitch as a wink and, for a moment, remain with the purely 'phenomenalistic observation' of movement that constitutes its material base? The answer to these questions, I think, might help to generate a moment of potentiality, a moment that presents movement in its fluid and contingent state of becoming, of becoming something new, something different, something that is and cannot be fixed, a moment that would illuminate what Goodley calls "the promise of potentiality" (89), which, in fact, characterizes any kind of bodily movement. This could be precisely one of those moments Goodley refers to for its potential to "consider how bodies should and *could* be lived" (87). An intersectional analysis could help us to disentangle discursively imposed vectors of differentiations and offer an unbiased insight into a corporeal life that is full of potentiality and not (yet) restricted and evaluated by standardizing distinction.

Of course, this uncovering of entirely free material movement is so far based on a purely theoretical conceptualization. It is from the coziness of the academic armchair that I push aside the intersectional categories encapsulating all movements and turning them into a coded gesture within dominant discourse. I implied that an intersectional analysis might help to reveal the potentiality of pure movement by following a top down approach that works through layers of intersecting differentiations. It would be the challenge for further enquiries to develop a bottom-up approach that not only zooms into the infinitesimal movements that take place under layers of discursive inscription, but that in fact *departs* from these material and corporeal realities; an approach departing from a twitch (to remain with the Geertzian example) in order to evaluate a single moment of movement and its potential to create something new, different, and unprecedented, something that is not filtered through the gatekeepers of intersectional differentiation but which factually generates

the potential to alter our conception of what is normal. Such an approach might indeed bracket the "prevailing narratives [which] constrict disability's complexities" that Goodley mentions in quoting Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, and it could thus broaden what she calls "the imaginations of those who think of themselves as non-disabled" (cited in Goodley 88).

Intersectionality theory, I would like to think, will help us to produce and make way for such imaginings and *re-imaginings* as it deconstructs the coded barriers that hinder our imagination's free-floating development. Intersectionality's rootedness in direct political action thereby underscores Goodley's anticipation of spaces that offer "the inter-twining of activism and theory" (93). His essay shows how the field of critical disability studies promises to support a substantial challenge to a world that needs both a theoretical reflection on the normative discourses that render its realities meaningful *and* the activist response, resistance, reimagination, reorganization, and realization of its material and corporeal potential.

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Rouven Schlegel

Beyond Judgment: Towards Critical Disability Studies

What does 'critical disability studies' mean? Which particular importance does the adjective *critical* receive in a disability studies context? While being emancipatory, are these studies not critical *per se*? Why is this accentuation necessary, and which discursive function does it fulfill? These questions relate to Dan Goodley's essay on critical disability studies, which I will use as an opportunity to define the term 'critique' and situate it in the context of critical theory, as well as an occasion to deconstruct the notion of impairment. In doing so, I intend to demonstrate both the conditions and opportunities of a critical perspective on disability.

What is Critique?

Generally and etymologically speaking, the French loanword *critique* derives from the Greek *kritikós* and its infinitive *krínein*, which means to differ, to distinguish, or to divide (Bittner 134). With reference to Michel Foucault, one could also ask the philosophical question: "What is critique?" According to this French thinker, critique exists only in relation to something other than itself, "it is an instrument, a means for a future or a truth that it will not know nor happen to be [...]. All this means that it is a function which is subordinated in relation to what philosophy, science, politics, ethics, law, literature, etc., positively constitute" (Foucault 42). Hence critique is to be understood as a political attitude, it is the counterpart to the "arts of governing" (44). In this context, Foucault claims that critique is "the art of not being governed quite so much" (45). Starting with a decision of resisting being governed 'quite so much,' critique must reverse and release the "coercion characteristics" (66) which lead to specific knowledge within a concrete strategic field.

Following Foucault, we should differentiate between the practice of criticism, which refers to any valuing or judging statement, and critique as a general attitude of analysis of the effective complexes of power-knowledge. The latter leads me to Critical Theory, a well-known German social philosophy. Founded in the 1930s in Frankfurt by Max Horkheimer (541 et seq.) and others, this school of thought was oriented towards critiquing and changing society as a whole by applying knowledge from the social sciences and humanities. The approach of Critical Theory is fundamentally different from traditional theory, since it reflects its own socio-cultural and historico-political contexts rather than adhering to an empiristic-scientific positivism. In other words, traditional theory is orientated to understanding or to explaining society 'the way it is,' whereas Critical Theory seeks to develop new ways of thinking that

help to liberate human beings "from the circumstances that enslave them" (Horkheimer 578; translation by author).

Judith Butler posits a combination of Foucault's notion of critique and the Frankfurt School's criticizing impetus. For her, the two approaches can be understood based on the difference between judgment and critique: "Judgments operate for both [Foucault and Critical Theory] as ways to subsume a particular under an already constituted category, whereas critique asks after the occlusive constitution of the field of categories themselves" ("Critique" n. pag.). So, according to Butler, judgments depend on a given categorical structure, whereas critique points to those conditions and circumstances which are constitutive for all evaluated and constructed categories. Thus, Butler's conception allows for the possibility of thinking any key categories of any critical theory "beyond judgment" (ibid).

In the following, this framework provides the basis for addressing critical disability studies and it enables a distinction between critical und general disability studies. If disability studies wish to become *critical*, they must not only be understood as an appraising perspective which judges different conceptions of disability. Rather, critical disability studies must question its own major categories, constitutive conditions, and concrete relationships. Last but not least, it should reflect on its relationship to and functioning within general disability studies. Hereafter, I will focus on the issue of impairment. Based on a critical disability studies perspective, we need to first ask, 'What is impairment and how is it related to disability?' and furthermore: 'What kind of category is impairment and how is it used?'

Impairment

In all models of disability, impairment is a main point of reference even though it is understood and used in different ways. This is not at all surprising, since impairment unites the contingent array of disability. According to Bill Hughes and Kevin Paterson, "[i]mpairment is consequently entrenched in the biomedical and reduced to its dysfunctional anatomo-physiological correlates" (329). Within German disability studies, the debate about impairment is more or less neglected, whereas in Anglo-American publications the discussion is more controversial. In a nutshell, two lines of the hermeneutics of impairment, which are mostly regarded as contrary, can be named.

The so-called social model of disability tends to adhere to a scientific-biological framework: It strictly separates disability from impairment, and while it postulates disability as a social effect of exclusion, it considers impairment as a medical fact. By contrast, from a post-structuralist point of view and the perspective of a cultural model of disability, the "subject of impairment" (Tremain) is conceptualized as discursively constructed as a materialization in

a historico-political complex of power-knowledge (see Hughes and Paterson 333; Waldschmidt "Macht").[2]

Both approaches leave unanswered questions concerning the relationship between impairment and disability, such as: Which impairment leads to disability and which does not? When does it do so and at what point does it not? Why does it (not) do so and what are the constitutive conditions of both constructed categories? A decidedly *critical* perspective inevitably has to consider, first, that impairment as a category is neither static nor arbitrary. Secondly, this perspective must focus on the historico-cultural transformations which generate a contemporary "integrated field" (Link 179; translation by author) of impairment and disability.

Finally, Hughes and Peterson's conception of a 'sociology of impairment' rightly indicates that the debate about impairment tends to neglect the lived experiences of disabled persons. Referring to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological concept of a lived body's being in the 'world,' they consider that "impairment is more than a medical issue. It is both an experience and a discursive construction. It has phenomenological parameters, and it can be analysed as an effect of discourse and language" (335). Furthermore, they add, that "most importantly, the (impaired) body is not just experienced: It is also the very basic of experience" (ibid).

In my opinion, Hughes and Paterson raise important aspects which a critical discussion of impairment – and thus of disability – must deal with if it does not assume that disability is merely an effect or indication of oppression (see for a similar argument Schneider and Waldschmidt 67).

Deconstruction

A deconstructionist point of view will make this position more evident. According to Jacques Derrida, deconstruction is not a method but rather a critical perspective, for it allows a fundamental criticism of all descriptive terms, because their significance is no longer regarded as inherent (see Quadflieg 106; Kimmerle 27 et seq.). Following Derrida, a signifier does not refer to an ideally signified 'thing,' but rather to other signifiers. Each and every signified is always in the signifier's position (see Derrida, *Grammatologie* 129). Meaning and signification are not immanent or even transcendent, but rather result from the sign's differences.

To summarize Derrida, differences emerge in a process of repetition. They are not certain, rather they are *in becoming*. Thus, meaning depends on time and space; it can only be expressed ex post, in a lag, a deferral, a delay. Furthermore,

2 | About the cultural model and its relation to the social model see Schneider and Waldschmidt.

repetition and motion have a spatial structure, such as intervals or distance. The French verb *différer* has two meanings and can be used transitively (to delay or to postpone) as well as intransitively (to differ or to be different) (see Hill 15). Derrida's neologism *différance* denotes this ambiguity, because it combines spatial as well as temporal parameters. The spatial parameter concerns the aspect of differentiating one element from another (binary opposition), while the latter emphasizes the necessity to postpone temporarily one interpretation for another. In short, meaning is an effect that is entangled in a network of references and produced in and by *différance*. Hence, for a deconstructive point of view it is necessary to analyze the effects of differentiations (meanings) according to their spacing and temporalization – and to analyze them critically.

To approach impairment from this point of view, I would like to refer to body theory as a complement to my argument. Drawing on Butler, Dan Goodley points out that in disability studies bodies also matter. Within a socio-cultural model disability is basically to be considered as a corporeal, embodied difference, so it is necessary to focus on the body. But here I would like to ask: 'Which bodies matter?'

According to Robert Gugutzer, the body is both product and producer of culture and society, and both the docile body (*Körper*) and the phenomenological lived body (*Leib*) are to be understood as a unit rather than as a duality (see Gugutzer 6). Furthermore, as 'Leib,' the lived body, features self-will, it is a living body: Rather than being simply a medium, the body *acts* pre-reflexively and on its own (see Jäger 54). This self-will can be unruly, it contains a "subversive potential" (Gugutzer and Schneider 43; translation by author), and thus also the possibility for resistance.[3] However, this unruliness is not to be mistaken for impairment: Whether and how a certain body practice counts as rebellious or as impairment depends on its temporalization, spacing,[4] and performative utterance.

Deconstructing Impairment

A body's specifications, descriptions, expressions, perceptions, characteristics, in short, all bodily signs, can be conceptualized as traces. In short and in keeping with Derrida's conception of *différance* with its spatial and temporal parameters, a trace is the always contingent term for the absence implied by a sign's presence. As such, traces hint at past signs which define them.[5] To

3 | Gugutzer and Schneider give the example of laughing out loud unintentionally in situations commonly regarded as cheerless, e.g. a funeral.

4 | See Schillmeier about the importance of time and space for the negotiation of disability.

5 | See Kimmerle (43) about Derrida's conception of trace.

assume a structure of reference which allows one to 'read' and 'understand' bodily signs, implies that bodies, and thus impairments, depend on context. Both the power perspective as well as the phenomenological approach and the acceptance of a body's self-will support this conclusion. Thus, both the body as well as impairment refer to 'nature' as well as to 'culture' (power), but not necessarily to one *or* the other; instead they are concomitant with each other. This conception therefore indicates that both the body and impairment should be thought of as interdependent categories.

The example of 'obstructive sleep apnea' (OSA)[6] provides an illustration. Whether and how we sleep and breathe is (usually) controllable only to a limited extent by persons themselves; in particular breathing while sleeping is hardly a matter of conscious control. Nevertheless, the medical definition defines OSA as "abnormal breathing during sleep" (Lurie 3). So from this medical point of view, breathing can be categorized according to a normalizing scale, and consequently problems of breathing while asleep are regarded as impairment. Instead, I would like to argue for an understanding of both (temporarily not) breathing and sleeping as a body's own practices, as essential corporeal actions. Following Merleau-Ponty, experiences of tiredness, wakefulness, pain, etc., are unique and constitutive of one's accession to the world: A specific corporeality generates specific insights. Thus, embodied experiences are more than 'just' sensations or, phenomenologically speaking, points of origin: They matter.

Therefore, the example of OSA illustrates a threefold taxonomy of the body as described above with reference to Gugutzer: the docile body (power), the lived body (phenomenology), and the autonomous body (self-will). The medical classification of OSA as impairment includes aspects of power, whereas sleep-related experiences belong to the lived body. Finally, the practice of (temporarily not) breathing can be understood as expressing a body's self-will. Thus, with this example in mind, from a critical and deconstructive point of view impairment is no longer conceptualized as a distinct sign, neither a natural nor a cultural one. Rather, it consists of signs and refers to other signs. Some of them may be described, others may be experienced, they may be encoded, their context may be medical, individual, social, cultural, etc. Whether and how the meaning of any so-called impairment operates, depends on repetition, spacing, and temporalization. In other words, impairment is an effect as well as effective.

6 | Obstructive sleep apnea is characterized by "repetitive episodes of complete or partial obstructions of the upper airway during sleep" and its diagnosis requires "the objective demonstration of abnormal breathing during sleep" (Lurie 3).

Conclusion

In this essay I argue that we should overcome essentialist conceptions of impairment and begin to deconstruct the binary dichotomy of nature and culture, to re-think the main issues of disability from a critical angle. To use Butler's words:

> "The critical task is [...] to locate strategies of subversive repetition enabled by those constructions, to affirm the local possibilities of intervention through participating in precisely those practices of repetition that constitute identity and, therefore, present the immanent possibility of contesting them." (*Gender* 188)

Finally, to come full circle, embedding this perspective into general disability studies would help to overcome judging conceptions of disability guided by a general supposition of repression. Coming back to Foucault, this approach would offer the possibility of not being governed quite so much. It would, last but not least, offer a space within general disability studies where a perspective of *critical* disability studies would be possible.

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