

# Foreword: Culture – Theory – Disability

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The seed for this collection was laid at the international conference *Contact Zones: Encounters between Disability Studies and Cultural Studies* which was hosted and co-organized by the International Research Unit in Disability Studies (iDiS) and the Institute of American Literature and Culture at the University of Cologne in 2012. It is noteworthy that this project has its own history. While the interrogation of disability in traditional (special needs) educational environments had long been on the research and teaching agendas at Cologne's Faculty of the Human Sciences housing the Departments of Psychology and Education (*Humanwissenschaftliche Fakultät*), the focus was significantly expanded with the faculty's establishment of the first university position for disability studies in a German-speaking country in 2008, specializing in the sociology of disability and disability policy. Since then, this position has proven a stimulus for spreading the approach of critical disability studies across the university and beyond. In parallel, the Literature and Philosophy Departments of the neighboring Faculty of the Humanities (*Philosophische Fakultät*) had discovered disability as a critical category of cultural analysis. As a result, a productive dialogue between graduate students from both faculties emerged, addressing disability from the perspectives of literary and film studies, sociology and political science, inclusive and special education.

Eventually, this conversation led to this collection, which aims to encourage the problematization of disability in connection with critical theories of literary and cultural representation, aesthetics, philosophies and sociologies of the body, the study of society and politics, science and technology. It links up with the interdisciplinary approaches to disability that can be found at the center of such foundational publications as Lennard J. Davis' *Enforcing Normalcy* (1995), Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's *Extraordinary Bodies* (1996), David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder's *Narrative Prosthesis* (2001), Robert McRuer's *Crip Theory* (2006), Margrit Shildrick's *Dangerous Discourses of Disability, Subjectivity and Sexuality* (2009), Tobin Siebers' *Disability Theory* (2008)

and *Disability Aesthetics* (2010), and David Bolt's *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* (since 2006).

The aim of this collection is to provide a platform not only for the thought of many of the leading scholars in the comparably young discourse of cultural disability studies, but also for some of the innovative voices at its disciplinary fringes. In this sense, it is set up to facilitate a dialogue between scholars working from within British, Czech, German and US-American discourses. Many of our contributors have chosen to focus their interrogation of disability through readings of the visual and literary arts. Our goal was to encourage contributions anchored in practice as well as theory-driven contributions. As a result, a number of essays show a self-reflexive engagement with disability studies not only as a heterogeneous transdisciplinary academic apparatus, but also as an expression of the social, political, cultural, and corporeal experiences of persons living with impairments and disabilities.

Drawing inspiration from Erving Goffman's interaction theory and taking up his idea of a party, this collection is organized along the triad of an *introduction*, the establishment of *contact*, and a series of prolonged *encounters*. It opens with two introductory essays by Anne Waldschmidt and Hanjo Berressem. **Anne Waldschmidt** explores the potentials of a cultural model of disability by discussing existing versions and the strengths and weaknesses of the 'social model.' Following a broad notion of culture, she argues for an analytical perspective that investigates the relations between discourses of categorization and institutionalization, the material world, 'ways of doing things,' modes of subjectivation, and their consequences for persons with and without disabilities. Tracing a link between disability studies and poststructuralism, **Hanjo Berressem** finds in the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari a productive framework to replace the nature|culture binary with a multiplicitous field of "machinic production" within which all life articulates itself as "differently constrained." With recourse to examples that range from constrained writing to the aesthetics of stumbling, stuttering, and the prosthetic soundscapes in William Gibson's cyberpunk fiction, he illustrates how positions of alleged disability emerge as sites of creativity and production.

Establishing a contact with the field, three figureheads of cultural disability studies, Lennard J. Davis, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, and Robert McRuer, provide entry points into *Culture – Theory – Disability* with contributions that exemplify what it means to read disability through culture. With reverberations of Sharon L. Snyder and David T. Mitchell's literary analysis of disability as a 'narrative prosthesis,' **Lennard J. Davis** builds on the observation that "media loves disability" and takes a critical look at the casting of non-disabled actors for roles with disabilities in a wide selection of mainstream film and television productions ranging from *The Big Bang Theory* to *Pandora*. Drawing attention to fair employment discrepancies in the movie business, he makes a call

similar to that of **Rosemarie Garland-Thomson**, who advocates for what she calls “inclusive world-building.” In sharp contradistinction to eugenic agendas, such an initiative would emphasize the generative rather than the restrictive potential of disability in contributing to the “community of embodied humankind.” Through a close reading of Pedro Almodóvar’s film *La Mala Educación*, **Robert McRuer** develops a “critically disordered position” that aligns disability interests with positions within queer theory that are similarly in favor of a non-universalizing critique of neoliberal politics of tolerance and identity.

The subsequent contributions are to be read as *encounters* which, in the sense of Goffman, imply ‘focused gatherings’ of diverse groups and involve conversations, debates, and controversies. Six ‘keynotes’ are each complemented by a two-tier set of responses from established and emerging scholars who offer ways to make the disability paradigm productive within their own fields of expertise.

**Dan Goodley** provides a detailed account of the transformative factors within the field of disability studies that have contributed to the emergence of *critical* disability studies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Contextualizing the work of Garland-Thomson, Shildrick, Davis, Siebers, and McRuer, among others, he spells out some of the challenges and potentials of theorizing disability beyond what is known as the ‘social model,’ without losing touch with its embodied reality in activism and practice. Following the trajectory of Goodley’s overview, **Konstantin Butz** highlights the concept of intersectionality to locate sites of revolutionary potential in the gap between a movement’s physical materiality and its codification as a discursive gesture. With recourse to the Frankfurt School and the works of Michel Foucault, Judith Butler and Jacques Derrida, **Rouven Schlegel** interrogates the notion of ‘critique’ in critical disability studies and offers a deconstructionist approach to impairment.

**Tobin Siebers** argues against the perception of a metonymical relationship between disability and pain, shifting away from the portrayal of bodily pain as an individual identity marker towards the experience of “epistemological pain” as a common thread which unites people with disability in a political struggle for recognition. Following Siebers’ claim that personal experiences of pain and disability identities are interrelated, **Andreas Sturm** explores the implications for the identity politics of disability rights movements, while considering that due to the United Nation’s Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities collective identities are in the foreseeable future likely to be framed through human rights discourses. With reference to the performance artist Bob Flanagan, **Arta Karāne** uses Siebers’ article as a springboard to offer an example of how the experience of pain may serve as a source of self-empowerment and as a critique of normative performances of masculinity.

**Margrit Shildrick** mobilizes the thought of Deleuze, Guattari and Derrida to conceptualize life with prosthetic aids in terms of “a potentially celebratory

re-imagining of the multiple possibilities of corporeal extensiveness.” As a proponent of critical disability studies, she points to the ways in which the discussion of disability even within the discourse of disability theory sometimes unquestioningly subscribes to a modernist notion of selfhood. In his response, **Jan Söffner** strengthens the phenomenological tradition in Shildrick’s account of embodiment and suggests alternative theoretical frameworks beyond the writings of Deleuze and Guattari pointing to the work of Evan Thompson and Francisco Varela. **Moritz Ingwersen** connects Shildrick’s proposal of transcorporeal subjectivity to a paradigm shift in the natural sciences that highlights the role of open systems, in order to distill an appeal to ethics that can also be found in the disability rights activism of Amanda Baggs.

Taking as a starting point a comparative reading of the athletes of the 2012 Paralympics and the protagonists of the X-Men movie franchise, **Karin Harrasser** offers a critical perspective on the semantics of disability in the context of technological enhancement. In resonance with Shildrick’s account of prosthetic corporeality and with reference to Bruno Latour and Deleuze, she draws attention to the problematic distinction between human and technological performance. **Eleana Vaja** uses the work of French philosopher of technology Gilbert Simondon to further illuminate the relationship between body and prosthesis and to understand the reciprocal determination between the technical object and its physical milieu. With particular attention to Harrasser’s notion of ‘the parahuman,’ **Olga Tarapata** explores similar lines by drawing on the poetics of American cyberpunk author William Gibson in order to offer an alternative model for non-normative engagements between bodies and environments.

**Ria Cheyne**’s article is an example of the incorporation of disability into the toolbox of literary criticism. She attends to the popular genre of the romance, noting that “romances featuring disabled heroes or heroines are uniquely positioned to challenge public perceptions of disabled people as asexual.” Via a close-reading of novels by Mary Balogh, Cheyne illustrates a literary attitude that breaks with the dominant depiction of disability as a metaphor of insufficiency. Contrasting Cheyne’s analysis with a reading of Franz Kafka, **Martin Roussel** responds by problematizing the relationship between the interpretation and the representation of fictional scenes of disability. Similarly, **Benjamin Haas** highlights the active role of the reader in the construction of literary meaning and points to the necessity of critically reflecting current concepts of normalcy beyond the level of fictional narrative.

**Kateřina Kolářová** dissects the political rhetoric of the post-socialist transformation in the Czech Republic to reveal a correspondence between a semantics of illness, disability, cure, and neoliberal austerity policies. Borrowing from the vocabulary of affect theorist Lauren Berlant and McRuer’s writings on crip theory, Kolářová proposes a “cripistemological” recoding of what

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neoliberalism seem to leave by the wayside. **Heidi Helmhold** responds to Kolářová's analysis by suggesting different interpretations of Lauren Berlant and Jan Šibík's photographic art. Reflecting on the value of disability in the political context of post-socialist Czechoslovakia, she furthermore builds a bridge to the devalorization of education in the wake of recent university reforms in Germany. With reference to the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, **Arne Müller** supplements Kolářová's analysis by positing the merits of an intersectional approximation of the categories of disability and social class.

