

Literary and Cultural Disability Studies. British and Continental Perspectives. Introduction

The emergence of disability studies as a critical paradigm in the humanities and social sciences has fundamentally transformed scholarly approaches to embodied difference in literary and cultural texts.¹ This transformation extends beyond mere methodological innovation to encompass profound reconceptualisations of how bodily and cognitive difference function as sites of social signification and cultural interpretation. While Anglophone disability studies has established robust theoretical frameworks over several decades starting in the 1990s, including the social model of disability, cultural and identity-based approaches, Continental European scholarship of the twenty-first century increasingly contributes distinct intellectual traditions and methodological innovations that both challenge and enrich these well-known paradigms. These Continental approaches include phenomenologically-informed analyses of lived experience drawing on philosophical traditions from Husserl to Merleau-Ponty; critical engagements with biopolitical frameworks influenced by Foucauldian discourse analysis; applications of systems theory derived from Luhmannian sociology; and nuanced interrogations of institutional practices shaped by distinctive European welfare state histories and social policy contexts, for example in the Nordic countries. Such approaches have generated productive theoretical tensions with Anglophone paradigms while advancing distinctive conceptual vocabularies for analysing embodied difference.²

This edited collection, emerging from an international and interdisciplinary conference at the University of Fribourg, Switzerland, in November 2023, represents one of the first systematic attempts to facilitate substan-

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- 1 This transformation builds on foundational work by scholars like Lennard J. Davis (*Enforcing Normalcy*, London, New York 1995) and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (*Extraordinary Bodies*, New York 1997), who established disability as a critical category for literary and cultural analysis.
 - 2 See Anne Waldschmidt: *Disability Studies zur Einführung*, Hamburg 2020 for a comprehensive overview that bridges German-language and international disability studies perspectives, and Dan Goodley: *Disability Studies. An Interdisciplinary Introduction*, London ³2024 for a thorough introduction to Anglophone disability studies frameworks and methodologies.

tive dialogue between these scholarly strands. The conference, organised through the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG; German Research Foundation)-funded research network »Inclusive Philology: Literary Disability Studies in the German-Speaking Realm«, advances a dual intervention: it seeks to anchor disability studies approaches more firmly within German-language literary scholarship while simultaneously challenging the epistemological premises of national and disciplinary boundaries in disability studies research.³

The volume's transnational and translingual orientation reflects pivotal developments in contemporary disability studies scholarship. As researchers increasingly interrogate the boundaries of predominantly Anglophone frameworks, new theoretical possibilities emerge through sustained engagement with diverse intellectual traditions.⁴ The methodological scope represented here – ranging from philosophical analysis to spatial theory, from narratological approaches to institutional critique – exemplifies not only the intellectual sophistication that emerges through transnational dialogue but also the transformative potential of interdisciplinary encounters. This theoretical heterogeneity enables multifaceted engagements with disability as a complex sociocultural phenomenon while fostering critical reflection on the situatedness of knowledge production itself.

The contributions of this volume intervene at an important moment in the field's evolution. As disability studies gains further prominence in Continental European academic institutions, the field's engagement with established Anglophone scholarship generates productive theoretical tensions while simultaneously advancing individual perspectives shared by distinct intellectual genealogies. These fusions are already evident in several significant scholarly interventions: Tobin Siebers' integration of Continental phenomenology with North American cultural disability studies in his concept of ›complex embodiment‹;⁵ Robert McRuer's incorporation of Deleuzian theoretical frameworks within crip theory to analyse transnational disability

3 Cf. the network's website https://www.germanistik.uni-muenchen.de/forschung/proj_ndl_baukasten/inklusive_philologie/index.html (31.1.26) for an overview about its activities.

4 Recent work on transnational disability studies includes Sharon L. Snyder/David T. Mitchell (eds.): *Cultural Locations of Disability*, Chicago 2006 and Robert McRuer: *Crip Times. Disability, Globalization, and Resistance*, New York 2018. Cf. also Linda Leskau/Tanja Nussner/Katherine Sorrels (eds.): *Disability in German-Speaking Europe. History, Memory, Culture*, Rochester, NY 2022.

5 Cf. Tobin Siebers: *Disability Theory*, Ann Arbor 2008.

formations;⁶ Margrit Shildrick's synthesis of Derridean deconstruction with feminist disability studies to reconceptualise vulnerable embodiment;⁷ and Dan Goodley's deployment of critical psychoanalytic approaches derived from Continental traditions to interrogate normative constructions of developmental difference.⁸ Similarly, European disability scholars such as Anne Waldschmidt have engaged productively with Anglophone disability rights frameworks while maintaining distinctive Continental theoretical orientations rooted in Foucauldian discourse analysis and Bourdieusian concepts of symbolic power and social fields.⁹ The volume thus instantiates how different scholarly traditions can mutually inform and transform theoretical paradigms. Perhaps most significantly, it delineates how rigorously contemporary literary and cultural disability studies has transcended traditional motif analysis to develop refined theoretical paradigms that profoundly reconceptualise questions of embodiment, representation, and social discourse.¹⁰

The volume's twelve contributions coalesce around four intersecting domains that characterise contemporary disability studies. These domains, although distinct in their methodological emphases, lay bare significant conceptual overlaps that bring to light the field's increasing theoretical sophistication and interdisciplinary reach.

Theoretical Foundations and Critical Frameworks

The analytical approaches deployed throughout these contributions demonstrate the productive dialogue between established disability studies paradigms and emerging theoretical innovations. This section examines fundamental epistemological interventions that are currently reshaping disability

6 Cf. Robert McRuer: *Crip Theory. Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*, New York 2006.

7 Cf. Margrit Shildrick: *Dangerous Discourses of Disability, Subjectivity and Sexuality*, New York 2012.

8 Cf. Dan Goodley: *Dis/ability Studies: Theorising Disablism and Ableism*, London 2014.

9 Cf. Anne Waldschmidt: *Symbolische Gewalt, Normalisierungsdiskurs und/oder Stigma? Soziologie der Behinderung im Anschluss an Goffman, Foucault und Bourdieu*, in: *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 36 (2011), pp. 89–106.

10 This evolution mirrors broader theoretical developments in disability studies in general, particularly the move from social model approaches toward more and divergent theoretical frameworks incorporating phenomenology, critical theory, and intersectional analysis. See, for example, Alison Kafer: *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, Bloomington 2013; Ellen Samuels: *Fantasies of Identification. Disability, Gender, Race*, New York 2014; and Tanya Titchkosky: *Disability, Self, and Society*, Toronto 2003.

studies scholarship, with particular attention to how philosophical inquiry, interdisciplinary methodologies, and evolving disciplinary formations generate new conceptual possibilities. The contributions show how theoretical innovation emerges from the dialectical relationship between canonical scholarly traditions and emergent critical perspectives, particularly in the dynamic exchange between different national intellectual traditions and their distinct methodological genealogies. Of particular significance is how these developments reconceptualise not only the objects of analysis but also the methodological foundations of disability studies scholarship itself.

Tom Shakespeare's (London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine) opening contribution, »On Impairment and Disability« advances a nuanced critique of prevailing theoretical paradigms while developing innovative conceptual approaches for analysing embodied difference. Through sustained engagement with Elizabeth Barnes' influential work *The Minority Body* (2016), Shakespeare interrogates two dominant yet potentially limiting approaches: the social model's systematic elision of impairment's materiality and Barnes' »mere difference« conceptualisation of disability. His analysis deploys Wittgensteinian philosophical tools – particularly the concepts of family resemblance and rule-following – to sketch out a theoretical apparatus that synthesises embodied materiality with social constructivist perspectives. Especially crucial to his argument is Shakespeare's theorisation of what he terms the »apparent paradox« of disability: the complex dialectic between impairment's potential negative valence and the possibility of flourishing with impairment. His contribution thus offers analytical standpoints that transcend reductive binary dichotomies while maintaining crucial connections to embodied experience and social reality.

Stuart Murray's (University of Leeds) »Creating In/Disciplined Work in Medical Humanities and Disability Studies« focuses on the complex dialectic through which disciplinary boundaries simultaneously constitute and constrain critical engagements with health and disability. Mobilising Donna Haraway's theoretical concept of »staying with the trouble«, Murray develops his innovative methodological framework of »in/discipline« – a concept that facilitates both the recognition of disciplinary structures and sustained critical resistance to their epistemological limitations. His close analysis of Meri Nana-Ama Danquah's memoir *Willow Weep for Me* (1998) brings to light how attention to intersectional experiences of disability unearth the constraints inherent in established disciplinary paradigms. His analysis acquires special force through Murray's reflexive engagement with his personal experiences of epilepsy, mapping how embodied knowledge fundamentally disrupts and

reconfigures conventional research approaches. Through this interweaving of theoretical analysis and experiential knowledge, Murray's contribution opens new possibilities for inhabiting interdisciplinary spaces as sites of both critical inquiry and theoretical innovation.

Klaus Birnstiel's (LMU Munich) »From *Motivgeschichte* to Cultural Studies and Beyond« presents a nuanced historiographical analysis of German literary studies' complex and often problematic engagement – or notable lack thereof – with disability as both a thematic *and* a formal category. Through meticulous attention to disciplinary genealogies and theoretical frameworks, Birnstiel traces how the field's historical emergence from nationalist *Kulturpolitik* and its subsequent methodological trajectories have systematically relegated disability to the level of thematic analysis, thereby overlooking its profound significance as an aesthetic force that shapes literary form itself. His contribution argues for innovative theoretical approaches for conceptualising the intricate relationship between disability and literary aesthetics, putting forward suggestions of how German studies might transcend its traditional methodological limitations. This historical-theoretical examination discloses how national scholarly traditions, shaped by their specific intellectual genealogies and organisational contexts, both generate and constrain modes of disability analysis.

Historical and Cultural Perspectives

The examination of disability's historical construction and cultural representation necessitates rigorous contextualisation within specific temporal, discursive, and sociocultural contexts. This section's contributions interrogate the complex processes through which disability has been negotiated across different historical eras and cultural environments, with particular attention to the dialectical relationships between medical epistemologies, aesthetic theories, and institutional power structures. Through careful historical analysis, these studies explain how understandings of disability emerge through the interplay of knowledge production and social figuration, while demonstrating how attention to specific national and cultural contexts unearths previously unexamined dimensions of disability discourse. These contributions thus advance our understanding of how disability functions as both an object of historical inquiry and a critical lens through which to examine broader sociocultural formations.

Martina King's (University of Fribourg) »»Many healthy children« or »Mercy Killing«? Eugenic Propaganda in NS Popular Fiction« offers a painstaking

ing analysis of how the popular medical novel genre functioned as an instrument of ideological ›normalisation‹ during the German Nazi regime's barbaric policies against people with disabilities. Through close attention to narrative strategies and discursive formations in works like Bettina Ewerbeck's *Angela Koldewey* (1939) and Hellmuth Unger's *Sendung und Gewissen* (1936/41), King interrogates how seemingly peripheral literary genres participated in legitimising ›eugenic‹ violence through specific rhetorical and narratological mechanisms. Her examination delineates how these texts developed distinct literary conventions that transformed racial biopolitical policies into euphemistic narrative trajectories. Of particular significance is King's demonstration of how these discursive patterns persisted even beyond 1945, stressing once again the complex relationships between literary form, ideological normalisation, and cultural memory.

Evelyn Dueck's (University of Geneva) »scandalum medicorum« – Taking Care of Your Eyes in the 18th Century« presents a nuanced investigation of how ophthalmological treatises functioned as critical sites for constructing new regimes of visual normativity in Enlightenment discourse. By carefully examining German-language medical texts published between 1724 and 1800, Dueck traces a crucial epistemological rupture: the transition from theological and physiological paradigms of blindness to a newly emergent social framework emphasising individual conduct and moral responsibility. This discursive transformation, as she lays bare, not only reflects broader cultural reconfigurations in conceptualising bodily difference during the Enlightenment but also anticipates later paradigms of corporeal self-optimisation. Her analysis thus elucidates how medical discourse participated in establishing new forms of disciplinary power while simultaneously generating influential models of embodied subjectivity that continue to shape contemporary understanding of visual impairment.

David Feeney's (independent scholar) »Beauty on Trust: Aesthetic Testimony, Verbal Description and the Impact of the ›Objectivity Imperative‹« investigates the complex intersection of aesthetic experience, disability, and institutional practice through rigorous philosophical and literary analysis. Through his reading of three pivotal Irish literary texts – Synge's *The Well of the Saints* (1905), Yeats's *On Baile's Strand* (1904), and Friel's *Molly Sweeney* (1994) – Feeney develops a refined critique of contemporary assumptions about aesthetic testimony and perception. Drawing on Barbara Herrnstein Smith's theorisation of contingent value, he charts how organisational insistence on ›pure‹ objectivity in verbal description fundamentally misconstrues the inherently interpretive nature of aesthetic experience. His analysis dis-

closes how literary and cultural texts engage with and challenge normative conceptualisations of perception, while simultaneously tracing how art gallery practices can reinforce problematic assumptions about sensory hierarchies and aesthetic authority. His chapter culminates in a reconceptualisation of accessibility practices that acknowledges the fundamentally intersubjective nature of aesthetic experience. In this vein, Feeney's contribution advances both disability theory and museum studies toward a deeper understanding of embodied perception and artistic as well as visitor engagement.

Literary Form and Narrative Analysis

The formal analysis of literary texts proves essential for understanding how disability functions not merely as thematic content but as a constitutive element of textual structure and aesthetic organisation. This section maps various complex devices through which disability shapes narrative architecture, focusing particularly on questions of perspective, spatial configuration, and the intersection of various forms of embodied difference. Through close attention to formal literary elements, these contributions expose how textual structures themselves participate in constructing, negotiating, and potentially disrupting normative paradigms of corporeal experience. Especially striking is how different literary traditions have developed distinct formal strategies for representing embodied difference, hence demonstrating the intricate relationship between aesthetic form and cultural conceptualisations of disability. These analyses thus advance our understanding of how literary form itself can function as a critical site for examining and challenging dominant paradigms of bodily normativity.

Linda Leskau's (TU Dortmund) »Disability and Intersectionality: The Concept of ›Healing‹ in Johanna Spyri's *Heidi* Novels« analyses how nineteenth-century children's literature negotiates complex portrayals of embodied difference. Through a synthesis of narrative theory and disability studies approaches, Leskau shows how Spyri's texts (1880–81) construct multivalent conceptualisations of disability that transcend conventional binary categorisations. Her analysis critically examines two paradigmatic yet contrasting depictions: Klara Sesemann's paralysis and Peter's grandmother's blindness. While Klara's corporeal transformation initially appears to reinforce individual models of disability emphasising medical intervention and personal volition, Leskau's close reading shows how the text's narrative strategies simultaneously destabilise this framework through careful attention to environmental determinants and social conditions. The grandmother's metaphorical ›heal-

ing« through religious engagement emerges as a particularly significant site of literary complexity, delineating how nineteenth-century texts could generate sophisticated negotiations between disability, spirituality, and social participation that resist reductive interpretation. This analysis thus shows how seemingly conventional children's literature can harbour complex theoretical engagements with questions of embodied difference and social integration.

Swaantje Otto's (BADW Munich) »Wienke Haien and Her Environment: Perspectivisation in Theodor Storm's *Der Schimmelreiter*« puts forward a nuanced reinterpretation of Storm's canonical novella (1888) through comprehensive attention to narratological structures and perspectival modulations. Through scrupulous textual analysis, Otto explicates how the text's treatment of disability operates within a complex dialectic that both reinscribes and destabilises nineteenth-century normative paradigms. Her examination discloses how the character of Wienke functions as a critical nexus where supernatural and domestic-realist narrative modes converge, thereby bringing to light disability's central role in mediating between different aesthetic and generic conventions of the nineteenth century. Of particular significance is Otto's conceptualisation of the domestic sphere as a potential site of resistance to hegemonic disability discourse. Furthermore, her careful attention to narrative perspective traces how Storm's deployment of focalisation techniques generates previously unexamined possibilities for representing embodied difference. Otto's analysis thus maps how careful attention to formal literary devices can reveal complex negotiations between normative settings and counterdiscursive potential in nineteenth-century texts.

Johannes Görbert's (University of Fribourg) »From ›Vermin‹ to ›Superhero‹: Continuity and Change in Literary Representations of Disability« offers a comparative analysis of Franz Kafka's *Die Verwandlung* (1915) and its contemporary reimagining in disability culture, particularly in the work of the Swiss writer Christoph Keller. Drawing on Jürgen Link's normalisation theory, Görbert maps the transformation of cultural paradigms from ›protonormalistic‹ to ›flexible normalistic‹ environments in the portrayals of embodied difference in his text corpus. Görbert's analysis points out how Gregor Samsa's metamorphosis lays bare the violence of bourgeois normativity in the early twentieth century, while, in contrast, contemporary reinterpretations craft more liberatory visions of corporeal difference. Through this comparative lens, Görbert makes evident both persistent patterns and decisive shifts in literary disability figuration across temporal, cultural, and formal boundaries from the early twentieth to the twenty-first centuries.

Contemporary Interventions and Life Writing

The final section examines how emerging theoretical paradigms and evolving literary genres in contemporary culture reconfigure the terrain of disability studies scholarship. Through critical engagements ranging from spatial theorisations of clinical environments to analyses of self-representation in the digital age, these contributions demonstrate the intricate nexus of systemic authority, lived experience, and narrative innovation. A special focus is put on how current modes of life writing and neurodiversity approaches challenge established conceptual boundaries while generating new methodological possibilities. These analyses show how shifting media environments and evolving forms of autobiographical and autofictional writing necessitate fresh analytical approaches that can account for the complex interplay between embodied experience, societal structures, and narrative authority.

Mona Baie's (University of Fribourg) »A Featureless Landscape of Humiliation and Loss«: Clinical Spaces and the Politics of Disability in Hilary Mantel's *Giving Up the Ghost* (2003)« develops an innovative conceptual framework for analysing clinical environments as crucial sites where disability emerges through organisational practices. Her interpretation discloses how Mantel's memoir articulates embodied difference not primarily through corporeal description but through intricate patterns of spatial and discursive power relations. Especially critical is Baie's formulation of »spatial narration« in clinical settings, which explains how hierarchical communication patterns – where physicians' authority manifests through speech while patients retreat into silence or internal reflection – constitute these medical spaces. This conceptualisation enriches spatial disability studies by explicating how literary texts can map the complex topographies of medical authority and patient experience, thus illuminating how organisational spaces shape both embodied experience and narrative possibility.

Jenny Bergenmar's (University of Gothenburg) »Neurodivergent Reading: Towards a Theoretical Framework« makes a significant intervention in literary and cultural disability studies by formulating interpretative practices that emerge from neurodivergent modes of engagement. Her analysis interweaves insights from neurodiversity studies, queer theory, and crip theory while remaining attentive to the cultural specificity of theoretical discourse. At the heart of her approach lies the concept of »neuroqueer worldmaking«, which she elaborates through critical dialogue with scholarship on community formation and historical consciousness. Her introduction of the Nordic concept »skev/skeiv« (meaning ›askew‹ or ›off kilter‹ and carry-

ing connotations of non-normative positioning) proves particularly fruitful, as it both complements and productively complicates Anglophone formulations of »queer« and »neuroqueer«. This linguistic and conceptual expansion shows how attention to cultural specifics can generate new interpretive possibilities, while simultaneously bringing to light how different cultural traditions might inform more nuanced approaches to neurodivergent literary engagement.

Harriet Cooper's (University of East Anglia) »Represent Yourself! Disability, Interpretation and the Commodification of Experience« examines how digital cultures and contemporary memoir practices reshape figurations of corporeal variation. By engaging with Mitchell and Snyder's foundational concept of »narrative prosthesis«, Cooper traces how disability narratives have shifted from sites of interpretive multiplicity to marketable forms of experience within neoliberal frames of mind. Her incisive discussion of parental memoirs about disabled children points out how even politically astute writers who aim to contest stigmatising narratives find themselves enmeshed in memoir's generic constraints and the logics of neoliberal self-optimisation. Cooper thus elucidates how media environments in the digital and social media age reshape narrative possibilities while concurrently circumscribing them through market imperatives. Her chapter shows how contemporary modes of life writing negotiate the complex terrain between resistance and commodification.

The contributions assembled in this volume underscore both the intellectual vitality of contemporary disability studies and the generative potential that emerges when Anglophone and Continental European scholarly traditions enter into sustained critical dialogue. Although preserving their distinct methodological genealogies, these diverse approaches divulge crucial points of convergence around fundamental questions of embodiment, representation, and social formation. The analyses collected here demonstrate how attention to different national and structural contexts can bring to fruition new interpretive possibilities while at the same time delineating persistent patterns in how literary texts negotiate questions of corporeal difference.

First, the contributions collectively demonstrate how disability functions not merely as thematic content but as a fundamental category of literary and cultural form, operating at both structural and semantic levels. This formal significance manifests in Birnstiel's examination of German literary studies'

methodological apparatuses and their problematic historical relegation of disability to thematic analysis, Otto's investigation of how narrative perspective in Storm's *Der Schimmelreiter* simultaneously reinforces and subverts nineteenth-century normative backgrounds, and King's analysis of how the authors who created specific narrative strategies and generic conventions in Nazi medical novels actively participated in constructing and legitimising eugenic violence.

Second, the volume highlights the crucial role of intersectionality and theoretical synthesis in contemporary disability studies, demonstrating how different analytical tools can shed light on previously often neglected portrayals of embodied difference. Leskau's examination of Spyri's *Heidi* novels unwraps how disability intersects with age, class, gender, and religious discourse in complex ways that resist reductive interpretation, while Bergenmar's integration of neurodiversity paradigms with queer theory and Nordic terminological paradigms shows how different theoretical traditions can productively explain disability figuration in their fused form. Shakespeare's conceptional positionings further enrich such syntheses by acknowledging both the materiality of bodily difference and its social dimension through careful engagement with Wittgensteinian concepts.

Third, the contributions underscore the importance of historical contextualisation and structural critique even as they maintain a high level of theoretical complexity. Dueck's examination of Enlightenment ophthalmological discourse demonstrates how medical and literary discourses have historically shaped understandings of disability through new regimes of visual normativity, whereas Cooper's analysis of contemporary memoir culture accentuates how neoliberal surroundings condition current disability portrayals even within politically aware narratives. Görbert's analysis combines Link's normalisation theory with Mitchell and Snyder's concept of ›kill or cure‹ narratives to elucidate how literary texts negotiate disability across different historical epochs.

Fourth, questions of reflexivity, positionality, and the situatedness of knowledge production emerge as crucial methodological considerations across multiple contributions. Murray's advocacy for ›in/disciplined‹ approaches productively destabilises disciplinary boundaries while remaining attentive to their real-world effects, whereas Baie's careful attention to her own scholarly positioning at the intersection of disability studies and medical humanities enables innovative theoretical insights about the cultural depiction of clinical spaces. Feeney's critique of museum practices, borne out of his own professional experiences, further unveils how scholarly self-reflexivity

can generate more nuanced approaches to accessibility and aesthetic experience.

Looking forward, this volume suggests several promising directions for future research in literary and cultural disability studies. The productive tension between Anglo-American and Continental European approaches opens new possibilities for theoretical innovation and methodological development. Particularly significant is the potential for developing truly multilingual and multicultural approaches to disability phenomena. Several contributions show how different national intellectual traditions can generate innovative theoretical and methodical amalgamations in their approaches to institutional critique, artistic portrayals of embodied difference, and the relationship between literary form and disability representation. The volume's emphasis on interdisciplinary dialogue, for example with theoretical approaches from history, sociology, and philosophy, further suggests how literary and cultural disability studies might productively engage with adjacent fields, although maintaining their own critical edge. This cross-pollination of approaches suggests new possibilities for disability studies scholarship that move beyond geographic and linguistic boundaries while remaining attentive to specific cultural and historical contexts.

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